

# Veterans Education at Tennessee Universities: An Analysis of State Policy and University Actions

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## Executive Summary

Collectively, Tennessee, institutions, and students, both veteran and their dependents, strive toward the successful completion of post-secondary education for the public good of the state and the private good of the student. To that end, the Tennessee Higher Education Commission (THEC) and Tennessee Postsecondary Education Analysis and Research Lab (TN-PEARL) commissioned this capstone project with Vanderbilt University doctoral students to analyze the interplay of existing state policies, institutional programs, and students experience thereof in pursuit of a post-secondary degree. Accordingly, the research team investigated the following questions, each with multiple sub-questions:

- What state policies exist to influence veteran student transition—any event or non-event that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles—at Tennessee public universities?
- What institutional efforts exist and how do they affect veteran student transition at Tennessee public universities?
- What resources do veteran students utilize to navigate their transition in, though, and out of Tennessee public universities?

The research team conducted mixed methods research at Tennessee's public universities consisting of policy analysis, quantitative analysis, and qualitative analysis. The research team visited five university campuses, surveyed all 10 VETS campus administrators, and conducted interviews with campus and state administrators. The results of these methods allowed the research team to triangulate on common themes and prepare state and institutional policy and programmatic recommendations.

The research team first sought to understand the nature of current state policies and programs affecting veteran students. Using state statutes and publicly available institutional data, the team fit policies and programs within an original framework to visualize the interaction of state policy, access, and completion goals. The researchers theorized that, in an equilibrium system, state policy will provide equal focus on both access and completion goals. The investigators determined that currently, state policy and programs prioritize access over completion goals in ways that stretch the capacity of institutions to successfully manage graduation and career placement goals. Additionally, the research team found that the lack of a clear, consistent, and measurable definition of "veteran student" resulted in ambiguous data and diminished program effectiveness on Tennessee campuses.

Second, the research team surveyed and interviewed university administrators and conducted physical and digital observations of five university campuses to understand what current efforts exist to support veteran students. Researchers found efforts centering on initial transition, academic support, and financial counseling. Further, researchers found a tension existing within veterans' centers and programs that balance a need to integrate veteran students into the larger campus culture, with the benefits of a separate, designated space oriented around the unique needs of this student population. Last, investigators found an underserved veteran dependent group of students that warrants greater consideration by campus leaders and policymakers.

Third, the research team surveyed students and found that veteran students and dependents seek support primarily for academic and financial issues. Further, the research team found a longing for stronger support around mentoring, degree completion, and career services. Veteran students and their dependents need succor in transforming their inherent cultural capital gained through exposure to military service into social capital to complete college and establish careers. Students worry about this last transition and experience the limitations of institutional services and state policies.

Accordingly, the research team oriented five recommendations for Tennessee state policy which require minimal financial allocations and five recommendations for institutional policies and programs.

#### Tennessee State Policy Recommendations

1. Establish an ad-hoc committee of THEC staff and university leaders to determine a common veteran student definition for the state as well as determine trackable metrics of success for this population.
2. Work with institutional research officers to ensure a common methodology is employed to identify veterans on campus and report the accurate enrollment of veteran students.
3. Target new state policy and existing programs like Veterans Reconnect around completion goals.
4. Foster collaboration between THEC, Tennessee Division of Veteran Services, and Economic Community Development to create mentorship and employment pipelines for veteran students.
5. Develop policy to include veteran dependents as targeted student populations.

#### Institutional Policy and Program Recommendations

1. Leverage data management and analytics to better analyze student usage, track student progress, and inform institutional decision making.
2. Adopt distributed advising and Green Zone training for all faculty and staff.
3. Hire positions within veterans' centers focused on graduation, external partnerships, and first jobs for veterans and dependents.
4. Include veteran dependents in official programming
5. Ensure veteran students have advocacy positions at the institutional policy-making level.

In summary, veterans and their dependents potentially occupy larger than realized segments of the university enrollment in Tennessee. The state and its institutions need to better monitor veteran student progress and develop policies and programs balanced between access and completion for both veterans and their dependents. In doing so, Tennessee public higher education will honor the service and impact the thousands of veterans contribute to university life in the state.





## Introduction

American college attainment levels have proven difficult to increase since the 1970s due to a convergence of issues surrounding the K-12 education pipeline, significant decreases in state funding of postsecondary education, and exponential increases in tuition levels (Bowen & McPherson, 2016). As a result, America's percentage of individuals with at least a bachelor's degree has incrementally declined and sits at 22.2% (NCES, 2018). Of students who are first-time, full-time students seeking a baccalaureate degree, only 60.0% complete within six years of beginning their education journey (NCES, 2018). Further, only 45.7% of the nation's working population possess any postsecondary degree (NCES, 2018). These low levels of educational attainment, college persistence, and completion have an economic impact on communities, states, and the nation. These deficiencies serve as the impetus for Lumina Foundation's<sup>1</sup> 60% education attainment goal. As the nation becomes more diverse, progress toward this goal supported by scholarship around attainment has become more pluralistic and focused on various subgroups (Barr, 2015, 2016). Coincident to this decrease in educational attainment, state funding of public higher education institutions has diminished 37% since 2000 (Pew, 2015).

To move the needle on degree completion, states must focus on various subgroups of students. Veterans make up 10% of U.S. citizens yet only 6% of college students serve or have served in the U.S. Armed Forces (Lumina, 2019). Veteran students often come with earned Federal educational benefits. This vibrant federal funding for veterans can fractionally offset gaps in state higher education funding.

The efficacy of delivering quality education to veteran students necessitates states and institutions to improve attainment rates amongst this population. Serving veteran students is a moral imperative for state universities. Collectively, Tennessee, institutions, and veteran students and dependents strive toward successful completion of post-secondary education contributing to the public good of the state and the private good of the veteran and their dependents. The effects of these dual pursuits fundamentally altered the trajectory of American higher education and American cultural, social, and economic life after the passage of the GI Bill in 1946. With three consecutive generations embroiled in conflicts and wars in the Middle East, servicewomen and men continue to stream onto campuses carrying multiple iterations of the GI Bill and unique life experiences.

Recent changes to the nature of the GI Bill, the largest federal financial aid program for veterans, have forced difficult decisions on veterans. They now can fund their personal educational enrichment or that of their dependents. Further, many veterans face a tenuous decision in pursuing a baccalaureate or graduate degree at heightened

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<sup>1</sup> Lumina Foundation is an independent, private foundation committed to increasing the proportion of Americans with high-quality degrees, certificates, and other credentials to 60 percent by 2025 from today's 47.6%. Its specific focus is on traditional students, adults with no education beyond high school and returning adults. Established in 2000, Lumina has made grants totaling more than \$250 million.

opportunity costs – especially in lost earnings – necessitating state policy and institutional investments to support access, completion, and post-baccalaureate supports for an increasingly complex student population. Accordingly, state and its universities aspirations for veteran success necessitate excellent and effective policy and programming promoting access and completion to honor the service and sacrifice of many Tennesseans.

## **Purpose**

Research around veteran students exists primarily in the realm of inquiry around community colleges. According to the Tennessee Higher Education Commission (THEC) 2018 Factbook, the majority veteran students—74%—who enroll full time at post-secondary institutions (8,615 veterans) enroll at public four-year institutions (6,400 veterans) (THEC, 2018g). The landscape around veteran students informs the state’s veteran policy. The purpose of this study is to describe the current context around veteran students and their dependents at Tennessee public universities. The results of this study will provide a basis of future inquiry for THEC and TN-PEARL to clarify the effect of the present and shape future, policy to better support veteran students. Further, this study will provide policy and practitioner recommendations to campus directors serving veteran students.

## **Research Questions**

We ask three primary research questions, each with sub-questions. In this report, we assume that every veteran student will be transitioning from a military environment to an academic environment, regardless of the duration or time between environment transitions.

RQ1: What state policies exist to influence veteran student transition—any event or non-event that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles—at Tennessee public universities?

1. How do Tennessee’s four-year public educational institutions identify veteran students?
2. How do Tennessee public universities communicate policies to veteran students?

RQ2: What institutional efforts exist and how do they affect veteran student transition at Tennessee public universities?

1. What dedicated veterans’ services and resources have institutions adopted to ease veteran student transition and assimilate to college?
2. How do institutions communicate with students about the available resources and services?
3. What resources and services are available to veteran students as they transition in, through and out of college?

RQ3: What resources do veteran students utilize to navigate their transition in, though, and out of Tennessee public universities?

1. How do veteran students report developing relationships to support successful strategies in transitioning in, through, and out of Tennessee public universities?
2. How often do veteran students access the resources and supports available to them at federal, state and campus levels?

We hypothesize that state policy focuses on veteran student access and transition to, but not through, institutions of higher education. These policy foci cause institutions to align resources in support of access goals to the detriment to retention and completion goals.

## Context

### Federal Context

Many veterans use federal funding through the GI Bill to fund their education, but even with the ample tuition and living support, almost half do not complete a degree program (NVETS, 2017). For nearly 75 years, the federal government has aided veterans' higher education, with the goal of supporting both national economic recovery and remuneration to individual veteran service. Immediately following the initial GI Bill post-World War II, the influx of veteran students transformed American higher education. Colleges and universities across the nation have since capitalized on increasingly diverse student bodies, but more recently have struggled to integrate these students into traditional notions of campus life, as evidenced by below average retention rates of 53.6% (Horowitz, 1987; Loss, 2012; Cate et al., 2017, THEC 2018b). However, it is not currently possible to measure national graduation rates for veteran students, largely due to collection methods, inclusion criteria, and veteran student identification (Cate et al., 2017). This lack of data quality hinders the study of veteran students.

Seminal in providing higher education access to millions of Americans, the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944 (GI Bill) provided and formulated a seminal and durable partnership between government and higher education (Public Law 346, 1944). Subsequent reauthorizations changed the benefit from reciprocity to compensation, where active duty and selected reserve members bought into the education benefit that included degree, certificate, technical, apprenticeship and correspondence courses, and even tuition loans. Today, all programs co-exist with the current authorization of the GI Bill and its expansive reach of eligibility and benefits. Table 1 outlines the primary iterations and the key changes brought with each reauthorized GI Bill.

*Table 1. Major GI Bill Revisions*

| GI Bill          | Year            | Attributes   |
|------------------|-----------------|--|
| Original GI Bill | 1944 to<br>1956 | Tuition and subsistence funding for up to four years of educational benefits at approved institutions. |

|                    |      |  |
|--------------------|------|--|
| Montgomery GI Bill | 1985 | Voluntary service member contribution of \$1200 in return for 36 months of educational benefits  |
| Post-9/11 GI Bill  | 2008 | Expanded GI Bill to cover the full cost of public in-state tuition and permitted benefits transfer to dependents. Fifteen-year use limitation. |
| Forever GI Bill    | 2017 | Extended timeline for a veteran to use education benefits  |

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Retrieved from <https://veteranseducationsuccess.org/gi-bill-history>

**Forever GI Bill.** The current GI Bill- The Forever GI Bill—has undergone significant revision and expansion of benefits to veteran students. Historically, the educational benefits extended to military veterans laid the groundwork for many of the financial grant and aid programs available across the United States (Loss, 2012). The Forever GI Bill seeks to meet as much of the financial need—including a stipend for books and housing—as possible and has proven to help these students fulfill their educational goals and have a successful transition to civilian life (Barr, 2016). However, carrying an annual cost approaching \$20 billion, this latest iteration of the GI Bill lags the financial needs to due to increases in state tuition - leading to some of the first questioning of the bill’s viability for the 21st century (Barr, 2016; Zhang, 2017). Recent implementation changes have restricted its use by dependent family members, perhaps as an indication of concern with its effectiveness and efficiency (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2017). Utilizing this benefit comes with many barriers for students including credit hour enrollment minimums, ensuring the institution certifies on time, and issues with repayment if a student drops a course. Knowing specific services and programs available to veteran students is difficult for students to navigate. Accordingly, states and individual education institutions fill need gaps with their own programs, each with their own eligibility and benefit characteristics. Some states, including Tennessee, have responsively added additional veteran student supports through key policy initiatives.

## Tennessee Context

While veterans comprise a small percent of Tennessee’s population (9.3%) (U.S. Census, 2015), in 2017, there were 435,000 working-age (25-64) veterans living in the state. The American Community Survey indicates that 91% of them have graduated from high school, but only 36% have some college or an associate degree. Data show that 25% have a bachelor’s degree or higher. Only 15 other states have lower attainments of education in the nation. (ACS (2012-2017) 5yr. estimates.) In 2014, data revealed that over 83,000 working-age veterans had some college but no degree (SLC Atlanta, 2017). As of 2016, there were 9,742 veterans, service members and reservists using GI Bill benefits and tuition assistance currently enrolled in Tennessee postsecondary institutions (Tennessee Department of Veterans Services, 2016). As effective service for these students and their families offers compelling economic, societal, and political narratives that boost local and state quality of life, state policymakers seek the engagement of veteran students and their dependents.

In Tennessee, veteran students and their dependents represent nearly 10% of university campus enrollment. With 36% of Tennessee's veteran population completing some college or an associate's degree, and only 22% (below the national average of 26%) of veterans hold a Bachelor's degree or higher, their educational attainment is a target rich environment (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). Veterans come with federal funds, making their enrollment appealing to cash-strapped institutions. Further, by engaging with veterans, state policymakers also are attempting to engage with their families who may also benefit from their funding. Leveraging these beneficiaries attracts veteran families with similar educational attainment goals. Following this logic, THEC prioritizes veteran students as a key policy lever to both increase statewide educational attainment and align with the state's more altruistic recruitment of veteran citizens.

Increasing veteran student university enrollment is a low-cost, high-ceiling policy effort to help the state's "Drive to 55" campaign due to the availability of federal funds. This means the cost to the state of increasing enrollment is low while the likelihood of veteran students' program completion is high. Tennessee policymakers have focused many state programs designed to serve veterans. Even with this structural backbone, policymakers and institutional leaders neither well nor universally understand service member higher education experiences and utilization. The obfuscation of the veteran student experience led to this research project, focusing on veteran students and policies targeted to supporting them, in the context of Tennessee's suite of postsecondary policies and initiatives and the recently initiated TN-PEARL research program to examine them.

Tennessee is home to 10 public universities, 13 community colleges, and 27 colleges of applied technology. The state also has 34 private institutions with membership in the Tennessee Independent Colleges and Universities Association (TICUA). All 10 public universities, 8 community colleges, and 5 private institutions have received Veterans Education Transition Support (VETS) designation<sup>2</sup>. States counted 225,371 veteran students with 137,802 (61%) of the students on university campuses (Tennessee Higher Education Commission Factbook, 2018). The state enrolled 173,354 full-time veterans with 137,802 (79%) of the population on a university campus. Table 2 details the distribution of veteran students enrolled at the 10 public VETS universities.

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<sup>2</sup> Through the Tennessee Veterans Education Transition Support Act of 2014, THEC recognizes higher education institutions which allocate resources, establish, and conduct support programs for veterans' successful transition from military service to college enrollment. Campuses may apply to THEC for this recognition. THEC has extended this recognition beyond public higher education to private institutions, (TN VETS Act, 2014; THEC, 2018b). Chattanooga State, Columbia State, Jackson State, Northeast State, Pellissippi State, Volunteer State, and Walters State are Community Colleges. Bryan College, Christian Brothers, Lipscomb University, and Maryville College are private institutions with VETS designation.

Table 2. 2018 Veteran Student Enrollment at Approved Four-year Public VETS Campuses

| Campus  | Number of Veterans Enrolled on Campus | Percent of Total |
|---|---------------------------------------|------------------|
| Austin Peay State University                      | 2664                                  | 42.6             |
| East Tennessee State University                   | 512                                   | 8.2              |
| Middle Tennessee State University                 | 771                                   | 12.3             |
| Tennessee State University                        | 248                                   | 4.0              |
| Tennessee Tech University                         | 306                                   | 4.9              |
| University of Memphis                             | 531                                   | 8.5              |
| The University of Tennessee - Chattanooga         | 412                                   | 6.6              |
| The University of Tennessee Health Science Center | 38                                    | 0.6              |
| The University of Tennessee Knoxville             | 517                                   | 8.3              |
| The University of Tennessee Martin                | 254                                   | 4.1              |
| Total   | 6253                                  | 100              |

Source: <https://www.tn.gov/thec/bureaus/academic-affairs-and-student-success/veterans-education/redirect-veterans-education/approved-vets-campuses.html> Aug 6, 2018

### Institutional Context

Overall, 44.6% of students graduate from Tennessee public institutions, but veteran students at universities fare better than their college counterparts by posting a 57.1% graduation rate. Two broad categories divide the universities—the University of Tennessee (UT) system and the Locally Governed Institutions (LGI). The campuses at Knoxville (UTK), Chattanooga (UTC), Martin (UTM), and the Health Science Center (UTHSC) comprise the UT system. Six LGIs—Austin Peay State University (APSU), East Tennessee State University (ETSU), Middle Tennessee State University (MTSU), Tennessee Technological University (TTU), Tennessee State University (TSU), and the University of Memphis (UoM)—released from Tennessee Board of Regents (TBR) governance in 2015, govern themselves through their own boards of trustees. Incentivized by the VETS Act and other THEC initiatives, public institutions in Tennessee feature a strong commitment to serving veteran students and their dependents with some—APSU, MTSU, UoM, UTC, and UTK—constructing or planning dedicated facilities specified for veteran students. Other institutions possess networked student and academic support programs for veterans. The new policy environment developments have led THEC to adopt an advisory role in addition to their coordinating board responsibilities to better coordinate veterans’ services in the state. In doing so, THEC counsels the many new initiatives undertaken on university campuses.

**Tennessee Higher Education Commission.** THEC is the state coordination board for all public postsecondary institutions in Tennessee. As a state, Tennessee has a multitude of programs and policies designed to enable veteran students to fulfill their postsecondary needs. THEC and The Students Assistance Corporation unified agencies (THEC-TSAC) facilitate these programs—Tennessee Reconnect, Helping Heroes, and Tennessee Strong. In this paper, we will use THEC as the identifier of both agencies. Mike Krause, a combat veteran who served tours in Iraq and used his GI Bill to earn his master’s degree at Peabody College, leads THEC. Accordingly, his support has led

THEC to provide additional resources for veteran students that go above what is normative for most state agencies.<sup>3</sup> THEC recognizes the difficulties veterans and their dependents encounter in understanding, accessing, and complying with the federal, state, and institutional education benefit programs. Each program comes with its own administrative requirements, demanding bureaucratic expertise to properly implement. In 2014, THEC passed the Tennessee Veterans Education Transition Support Act to support state higher education public institutions in facilitating veteran students' successful transition from the military to college enrollment (Tennessee VETS Act of 2014). This act also lifted the requirement for out-of-state tuition and fees for any veteran student enrolled in any public TN public institution of higher education.<sup>4</sup>

With the 2014 THEC implementation of the nation's first statewide free college program—Tennessee Promise<sup>3</sup>—now leading to the first cohort of Promise students graduating from university campuses, Tennessee policymakers are increasing scrutiny and inquiry around targeted populations of students that are necessary to move the needle for greater state postsecondary attainment. Through the “Drive to 55” campaign, Tennessee aspires to propel its postsecondary attainment from 38 % to 55 % by the year 2025. To date, policies oriented around college access and transition dominate the discussion. Policymakers are beginning to focus on developing more programs to promote degree attainment of all students—and among veteran students. With two large military bases in the country, a state history where high levels of military involvement permeate, and a state agency focused on veterans, policies around veterans occupy a prioritized position amongst competing issues.

THEC serves as the Veterans Administration’s (VA) state authorizing agency, facilitates programs to reconnect veterans with campuses and increase capacity. Suitably, postsecondary policymakers often include veterans—commonly affiliated with THEC—in their deliberations. The development of the next phase of higher education policy in Tennessee behooves understanding the current policy landscape and how these policies influence campus actions. To that end, this research seeks to describe, analyze, and offer new directions for understanding veterans’ transition in higher education and how state policy may better facilitate degree attainment.

Issues regarding the defining and identifying of these students bind state leaders and leave them with insufficient data to create policies meant to serve these students. Veteran confidence in enrolling themselves and their dependents at Tennessee state institutions is connected to the quality of its veteran-friendly campuses and program design. To gain recognition as a "veteran-friendly state", Tennessee seeks its veterans'

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<sup>3</sup>In addition to these programs designated for service members, Tennessee also has a robust offering of policies collectively known as the Tennessee Promise—referred to as Promise in this project—designed to increase educational attainment levels.

<sup>4</sup>For veterans meeting requirements: (1) Has not been dishonorably discharged from a branch of the United States armed forces or the national guard; (2) Is eligible for Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits or Montgomery GI Bill benefits; and (3) Enrolls in a public institution of higher education, after satisfying all admission requirements, within twenty-four (24) months after the date of discharge as reflected on the veteran's certificate of release or discharge from active duty, Form DD-214, or an equivalent document. Further accommodations are outlined for veteran students to qualify for in-state tuition and fees (Tennessee VETS Act of 2014).



confidence in all sectors - including higher education. This study examines the policy context around veteran students on university campuses, and the experiences of those students.

## **Literature Review**

### **Defining Veteran Students**

Vacchi (2012) defines veteran students as "any student who is a current or former member of the active duty military, the National Guard, or Reserves, regardless of deployment status, combat experience, legal veteran status, or GI Bill use" (p.17). Cole (2013) narrows this definition to veteran students who are transitioning from the military to an educational campus environment. In this study, we use the definitions presented in Table 3. Our decision to place "veteran" before "student" recognizes the key position one's military service plays in the formation of identity, but the literature exchanges the terms without consensus on the proper terminology. Table 3 defines other purposefully used terms and their sources which we use in this research.

Table 3. *Term Definitions Related to Veteran Students*

| <b>Term</b>        | <b>Definitions</b>   | <b>Source</b>                  |
|--------------------|--|--------------------------------|
| Veteran Students   | Any students who are former or inactive members of the military, the National Guard, or Reserves, regardless of deployment status, combat experience, legal veteran status, or GI Bill use, who have transitioned from the military to an educational campus environment | Authors' definition            |
| Veteran Dependents | Students attending an institution who are the qualified spouse, natural, adopted, or stepchild or parents of the veteran.  | U. S. Veterans' Administration |
| Transition         | Any event or non-event that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles   | Schlossberg (1995)             |
| Retention          | The continual enrollment of a student in a degree program leading toward the completion of the program   | Braxton et al (2014)           |
| Attainment         | The successful completion of a student's program of study culminating in the conferral of a certificate or degree  | Braxton et al (2014)           |

### **Theory of Student Persistence**

Braxton et al. (2014) posit a linear model of how the student's ability to persist and complete postsecondary education depends on the interplay between student and institution (Figure 1). The characteristics of the student directly influence their initial commitment towards their goals, their affinity towards an institution, and their assimilation into student culture. These characteristics and attributes then interact with the institution's commitment and capacity to engage in welfare promotion and integration of their students. The efficacy of this interaction then helps to determine the social integration of the student which then reinforces the student's institutional commitment and ultimate persistence.

This theory of student persistence rests on a few assumptions. First, student persistence is different at residential colleges and universities due to a variety of factors stemming from the institutional capacity to address and fulfill student needs. Second, students selecting these types of institutions are seeking experiences not easily filled at commuter types of institutions. Third, the student and institution are engaged in a series of interactions surrounded by changing social dynamics and personal attributes. The actors in these relationships share the burden of responsibility for the ultimate persistence

towards graduation. Applying Braxton’s theory to veteran students is a new line of inquiry and one that merits consideration in a context like Tennessee where robust support and incentives for veteran students exist.

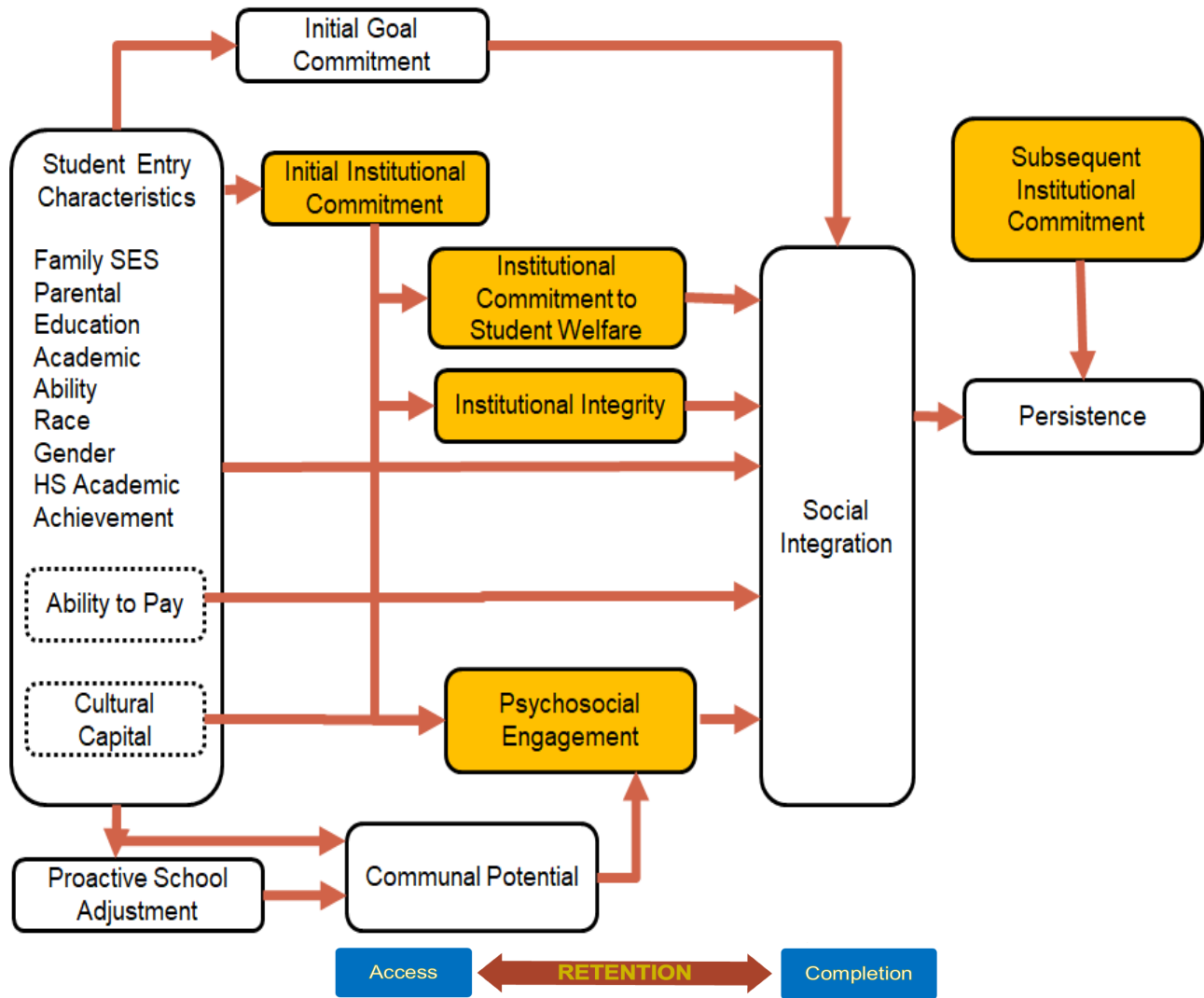


Figure 1. Braxton et al. (2014)'s Theory of Student Persistence

### Schlossberg’s Transition Theory

All students experience transitions into college, and the success of these transitions influences their completion. Many four-year colleges have designed their infrastructure to support primarily traditionally-aged students and possess a limited capacity for non-traditional students like veterans. The significant life transitions experienced by non-traditional students compound that of the traditional college student transition given differences in experiences, personal characteristics, administrative

programs, and community expectations. Schlossberg's Transition Theory broadly applies to the transition process for veteran students, recognizing the relationships between the individual and institution in the journey between the origin and terminus. According to Schlossberg, Waters, and Goodman (1995), a transition is “any event or non-event that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles” (p. 27). Within this definition, Schlossberg identifies three types of transitions: anticipated, unanticipated, and non-events. Not all events are transitions, and individuals experience each situation differently. However, formative experiences exert influence on how individuals see the world. Veteran students’ previous experiences and military culture may cause them to perceive events as transitions with a high degree of coherency with their military peers and incongruence with their non-military peers (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011).

**Applying Schlossberg’s Theory to Veteran Students.** Using Schlossberg’s Transition Theory to improve veteran student persistence requires a thoughtful and rigorous approach to understanding events veteran students consider as transitions, their potential reactions, and potential support in developing strategies for success. Schlossberg describes four theoretical aspects of an individual’s transition—situation, self, support, and strategies, depicted in Figure 2. Schlossberg's theory of transition enjoys robust literature surrounding veteran students. These studies have focused on a practical application of theory (Goodman, Schlossberg, & Anderson, 1997), academic advising (Ryan et al, 2011), institutional structures and actions (Griffin and Gilbert, 2015; Cole, 2013), identity development (Green and Van Dusen, 2012), peer mentoring and staff training (Morales, A., 2017), classroom adjustments (Kirchner, M., 2015), and social adjustments (Schiaivone & Gentry, 2014). Little literature exists on gender-specific groups. Pelligrino and Hoggan (2015) investigated transition, women veteran students, motherhood, and marriage. Much of the work centers on the community college transition (DiRamio and Jarvis, 2011; Griffin and Gilbert, 2015; Pelligrino & Hoggan, 2015; Wheeler, 2012). Certainly, the transition from the rigid and highly disciplined culture of the military to that of the ambiguous and decentralized nature of university life makes the experience of veteran students a prime suspect of inquiry.

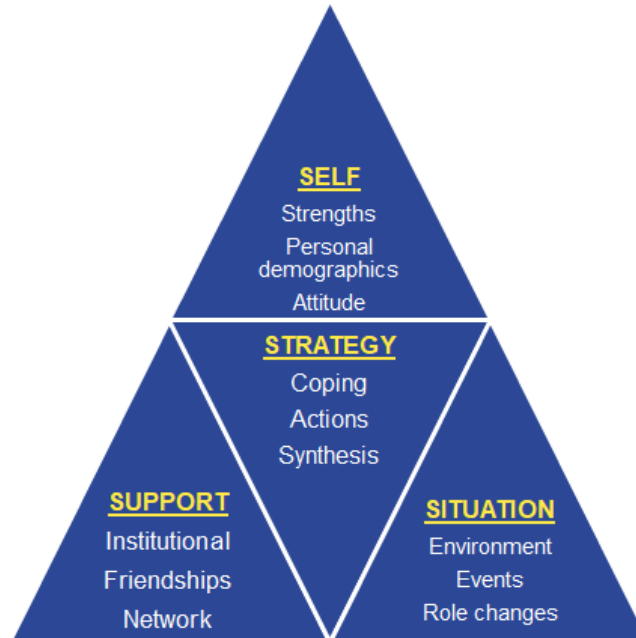


Figure 2. Schlossberg's Transition Theory

**Situation.** The situation element refers to the features of a transition and how they may influence the veteran student. Past experiences, level of self-control over the transition, role changes, permanency, and event duration all describe and influence a situation (Bailey-Taylor, 2009). Griffin and Gilbert (2015) identified that veteran students might find the college transition challenging due to lack of assistance in navigating the financial aid process or unfair evaluation or acceptance of military credits as academic credits. Increased stress and frustration with steps that occur before enrollment causes veteran students to frame the situation as a negative experience.

**Self.** The self element focuses on the personal characteristics and psychological resources that help individuals cope with and engage in their situation (Cole, 2013; Ford & Vignare, 2014; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015). While veteran students find support from family and strong friendships, they can struggle on campus often relating to non-veteran students and the academic community whose own history is disparate (Green and Van Dusen, 2012). The extent of an institution's awareness of these distinctions influences the supportiveness of their transition programs.

**Support.** Support systems describe the resources available to the veteran student to answer specific needs and to develop robust strategies. Administrators should consider three facets of support systems: the type of support best suited for the situation, the function the support serves (aid, feedback, or affirmation), and an appropriate or warranted measurement (Schiaivone & Gentry, 2014; Morales, A., 2017). The confluence of veteran student college knowledge and academic preparation with that of federal, state, and institutional fiscal policy will color the programs necessary to support successful strategies toward completion (Kirchner, M., 2015).

**Strategy.** Successful strategies implemented by colleges and universities to decrease veteran student isolation and increase completion include providing personnel and services through veteran-specific initiatives, creating opportunities to interact with other veteran students, and developing a mutual understanding within the greater academic community (Schiavone & Gentry, 2014). These strategies, among others, can produce the social capital support that eases transitions and allows students to maximize their postsecondary experience. In turn, students will develop strategies in response to the transition with the aid of supports. In doing so, students may modify, control meaning, or manage post-transition and future stress (Bailey-Taylor, 2009). The investigation of the veteran student transition through Schlossberg's lenses of situation, self, support, strategies offers a rich source of analysis.

## **State Policy**

State actions within higher education exist to distribute institutional funds, coordinate institutional actions, and disburse aid to students (Glenny, 1959). Successfully done, all students can benefit from affordable post-secondary education at quality institutions. When poorly implemented, the state distributes public monies to students who have little need for the provided aid, while underfunding students with the greatest need. Often, these students already attend institutions with limited capacity for delivering a high-quality education (Bok, 2013). Following an era of drastic decreases in state funding in higher education leading to rapid increases in costs of college, states have begun to slowly return to funding in higher education (SHEEO, 2018). The difference now, however, is the diffusion of performance-based funding has allowed state lawmakers to clearly incentivize institutions to align to state's goals in degree productivity and attainment - largely for economic and workforce development purposes (Tandberg & Hillman, 2013). Political actors can leverage other mechanisms – grants, aid, and rhetoric – to shape policy and institutional actions towards desired ends. In this vein, Tennessee offers veteran students a suite of postsecondary policy initiatives designed to encourage their college matriculation and ultimate success all resting on the backdrop of the Forever GI Bill. Between federal and state policy, veteran students residing or attending institutions in Tennessee are supposed to benefit from the policy landscape through having easier paths towards college enrollment, payments, as well as institutional efforts towards their retention and persistence. Missing is the literature connecting state policy, transition theory, and retention theory to the ultimate success of veteran students and higher education

## **The State Policy, Access, and Completion (SPAC) Model**

State policy, access, and completion do not exist in isolated vacuums. Instead, these actions are engaged in a dynamic process that is in continuous development that greatly affects transition. We developed a framework to incorporate retention and transition theories and how state policies influence both models in Figure 3. State actors incentivize institutional and student behavior either through policy entrepreneurship attached to economic or political ends or in response to identified gaps in the delivery of services to key constituents (Doyle, 2007; Kingdon, 1984). As the connection of higher education to the economic prospects of a state re-enters political consciousness,

leveraging policy to shape the actions of autonomous and insulated institutions of higher education has only increased in importance. Schlossberg's transition theory posits that successful transition will lead to academic success for students. In Braxton's retention theory, the transition is dependent on the daily interactions between student and institutional context. Here, retention is the link between access and completion. Tennessee state policies address both transition and success of veteran students and thus warrants a holistic analysis of the interactions between policy, transition, and persistence.

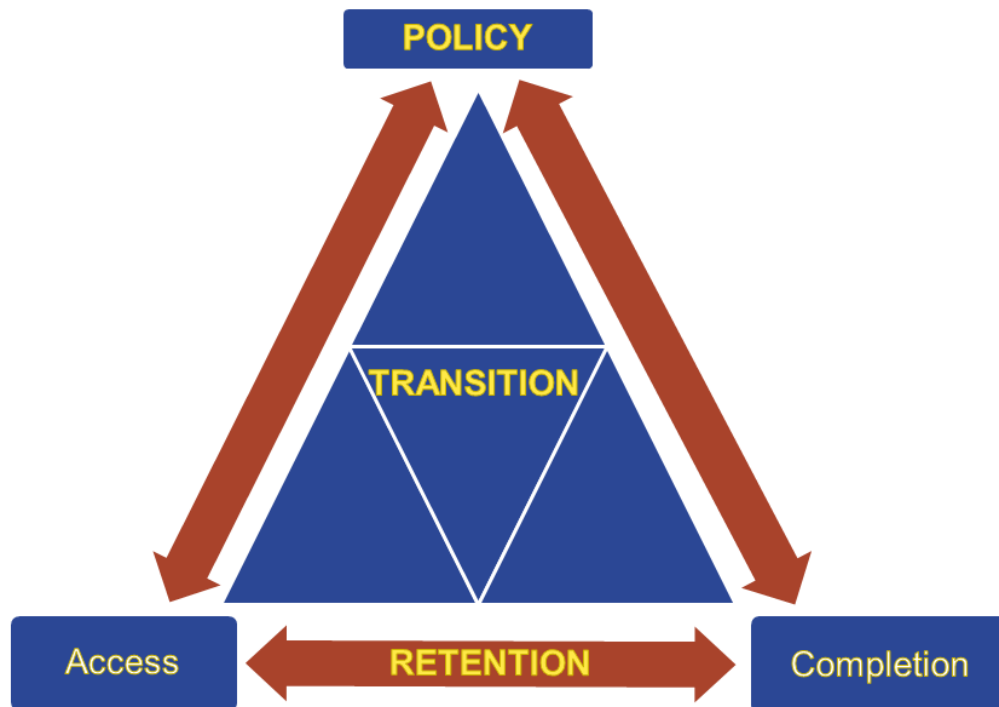


Figure 3. *State Policy, Access, and Completion (SPAC) Model*

*Note: Authors' interpretation*

In the SPAC model, policy geared towards veteran students is primarily for their successful transition back to civilian life. Their success once on campus is largely a secondary consideration of state policy; instead, trusting the institution with the completion of the student. Institutions design programs primarily for student success where their transition—especially the initial transition—is a component of the overall process. Accordingly, transition and retention share many characteristics and warrant policy considerations that target the full student life cycle on a campus. Policy and institutional actions designed to impact access or completion shift the focus towards a goal and increases the strain on the other. For example, in this model, focus on increasing access may increase the flow of students who need additional support to find success. This increase would decrease the resources available for completion, as attention will focus on the intake and initial progress of new students - straining resources

for retention and completion. Conversely, focus on retention and completion will limit access as new veteran students may have difficulty navigating their new context without institutional focus on their orienting to their new context. Our study attempts to articulate how this framework fits the context and offer policy and institutional recommendations on where gaps currently exist in Tennessee.

## **Challenges Facing Veteran Students on College Campuses**

The literature identifies several challenges facing veteran students, including degree affordability, social transition, campus and classroom integration, and institutional program support. While all college students encounter difficulties in their campus and college integration, veteran students enter campus with unique challenges that may make their college transition more turbulent (Cook & Kim, 2009; Griffin & Gilbert, 2014; Wilson, Smith, Lee, & Stevenson, 2013; Zinger & Cohen, 2010). Veteran students are transitioning not only into their roles as students but also as civilians. They struggle with a variety of transition issues including role incongruities, maturity issues, relationships, and identity renegotiation (Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). Veteran students need support in meeting academic expectations, balancing academic with other obligations, relating to non-veteran students, managing the financial aspects of college attendance, coping with service-related disabilities, and developing skills necessary for successful college and professional careers (Roost & Roost, 2014; Steele, Salcedo, & Coley, 2010).

**Social Transition.** Key challenges faced by veteran students in higher education include transitioning from the familiarity of the close-knit military environment to the ambiguity of a sprawling physical and digital campus environment; balancing school, work, and family demands; managing combat-related experiences including PTSD and physical injuries; and grieving the loss of comradeship while forming new campus peer networks which may be particularly tricky at "commuter" schools, and difficulty establishing faculty and staff connections (Cole, 2013; Ford & Vignare, 2014; Green & Van Dusen, 2012; Kirchner, 2015; Naphan & Elliott, 2015).

While colleges promulgate slogans communicating a sense of oneness and community to the student body, veteran students often feel alienated and misunderstood. Despite increasing diversity among veteran students, there is a common misconception that all veteran students are males and have served in combat units overseas (Lighthall, 2012; Naphan & Elliott, 2015; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). Veteran student diversity further complicates their campus integration when civilian peers also assume homogeneity. The flawed assumption of veteran students as homogeneous challenges effective implementation of state and institutional resources toward veteran student transition. Civilian students often alienate veteran students due to a lack of understanding of how each veteran student is unique and how they add to the university (Elliott, Gonzalez, & Larsen, 2011). Many non-military students envision veteran students as commandos who have served overseas in combat and are relieved to return home from the strictness of military life. A result has been immiscible relationships between veteran and civilian students.



The disconnect with their civilian peers may nudge veteran students away from state and private colleges. With adult-oriented student bodies and the additional attraction of flexible schedules, for-profit institutions attract many veteran students. Despite their attractive environment, many for-profit institutions have notoriously high attrition rates, lower post-graduation employment rates, and high student loan debt (Guo, Pollak, & Bauman, 2016). THEC has not awarded VETS designations to any for-profit institutions (THEC, 2018b). To better support veteran students, colleges and universities need to understand the transition of military veterans to civilian life as well as college life.

**Degree affordability.** Even though resources and supports are critical to a successful transition from military life to college, very few universities address these concerns. Of institutions that offer in-state tuition, 52% provide in-state tuition rates, regardless of the length of residency and 76% provide previous veteran residents in-state tuition upon their return (Queen & Lewis, 2014). However, institutions report that 43% of self-identified veteran students do not receive military or veterans' financial education benefits. Queen and Lewis (2014) found that while 96% of the over 1,500 private and public Title IV eligible, degree-granting institutions, enroll veterans, financial literacy support services for this student population were lacking. Despite the complexities of the Post-9/11 GI Bill, only 44% of veteran students or their dependents reported an offer of financial counseling. While veteran students have higher completion rates than their non-military peer students, they take longer to complete their academic programs—an issue compounded by the delayed earning opportunities these students face due to their choice in attending additional education (Cate, Lyon, Schmeling, & Bogue, 2017).

**Classroom & campus integration.** Veteran students attend classes across all sectors of higher education and through all mediums—working full- and part-time, in class and online, at two-year and four-year public, private, and proprietary institutions (Zhang, 2017). However, in selecting colleges for enrollment, veteran students place less value on the quality of academic rigor, pedagogy and student support of programs, instead preferring accessibility, and availability (Callahan & Jarrat, 2014). This is contrary to campus trends of more extra-curricular support, and opportunities to explore and find an academic interest on campus. This veteran student pragmatic approach carries over into the classroom where veteran students display high degrees of focus but may be less inclined or able to establish social networks on campus. These developmental connections improve persistence and provide valuable social capital in future years (Callahan & Jarrat, 2014). The opportunity cost of dedicating even more time to academic studies is high for veterans balancing more responsibilities than traditional students. These issues are examples of how veteran students may not be leveraging their educational opportunities most efficiently, offering areas where institutions and state policy may intervene.

**Programmed support.** While some institutions only provide gathering spaces for veteran students, others provide programming. However, less than 25% of veterans report using career planning/services, mental health counseling, employment search assistance, academic support/tutoring, and other support services (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015). Veteran student organizations provide an outlet for social and career support,

however, are sporadic in their consistency. Merely offering a veteran student organization on campus does not provide the extent of the professional and institutionally integrated support needed for degree completion. Institutions should intentionally offer essential supports in facilitating transitions to life as a college student. With additional support, more veteran students may choose to self-identify, which may lead to a successful transitioning into their academic career (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015).

We utilized these ideas, structured around the SPAC model, to investigate how state policy guides and shapes institutional efforts, the combination of which effect veteran student transition from the military environment to the academic endeavor. We shaped our theory of action to include known veteran student challenges of degree affordability, social transition, campus and classroom integration, and institutional program support.

## Data and Methods

### Data

We collected data from five sources: THEC VETS institutional reports, surveys of student and campus administrators, interviews, institutional digital presence protocol, and observational protocols of campuses on-site visits. Figure 4 presents the data sources collected for each of our three research questions. We then developed a crosswalk to align each individual survey and protocol with each survey question (see Appendix A)

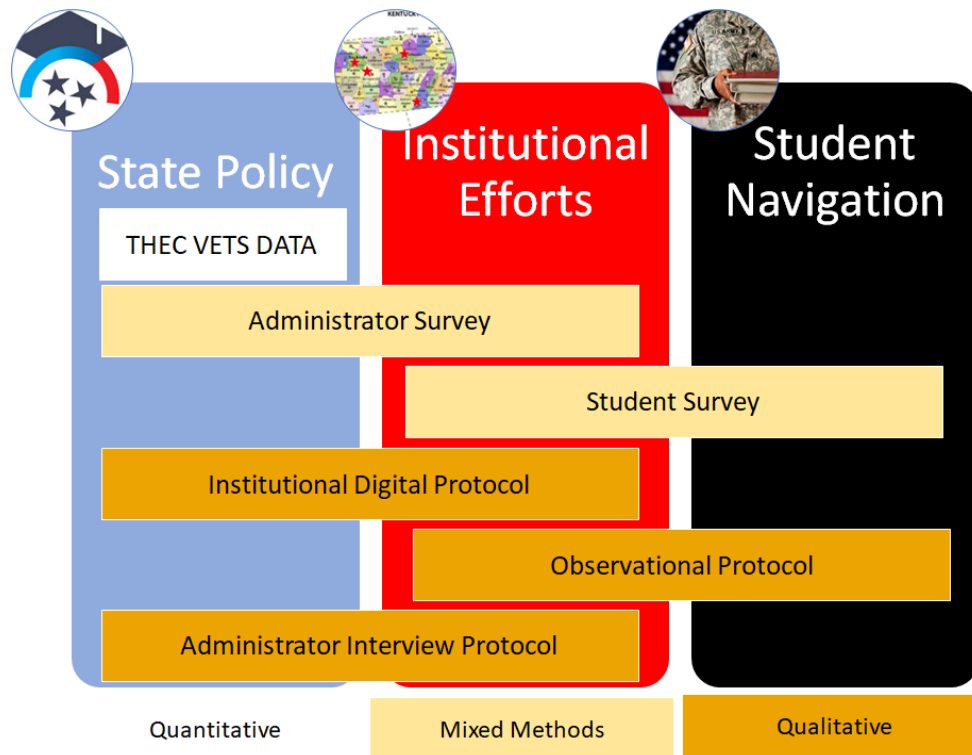


Figure 4. *Data Collection Sources*

**THEC VETS Data.** Implementation of the VETS Act requires institutions to annually report student-level data of their military-affiliated students (THEC 2018b). THEC provided this study with access to 2016 and 2017 VETS data—the first two years of reporting. These reports represent institutional level aggregate totals of veteran students and veteran dependents on their campuses, the method used by the institution to determine veteran status, enrollment by credit hour, Prior Learning Assessments (PLA) use, and graduation numbers by term. To protect FERPA information which might otherwise be identifiable given the low numbers of veterans on some campuses and programs, THEC did not provide access to student-level data.

**Survey Data.** We created two surveys: One for veteran students (see Appendix B) and one for campus administrators (see Appendix C) to support the investigation of our research questions. We initially drew the survey questions from the American Council on Education (ACE) Soldiers to Students II: Assessing Campus Programs for Veterans and Service Members survey (McBain, Kim, Cook, & Snead, 2012). We made subsequent adjustments to ensure face validity, as our survey assessed the transition of undergraduate veteran students from the military to the academic culture.<sup>5</sup> We updated instrument response options to better reflect the current collegiate environment veteran students are experiencing - specifically relevant to the Tennessee context. To track the alignment of the survey with the research question themes of policy, transition, and retention that arose from the existing research, we mapped each survey question to our research questions. Both surveys included open-ended questions which supported qualitative data collection. The final survey to veteran students consisted of 34 questions: 19 ACE II survey questions and 15 research team-developed. The final survey to administrators consisted of 29 questions: 21 ACE survey questions and 8 research team-developed. We tested each self-designed question with veteran students and educators at one of the research member's institutions. We designed the student survey to encourage veteran student reflection on their college transition experience. We asked the administrators to reflect on the institutional and programmatic design of the veteran students' transition.

We distributed both surveys to all VETS administrators at all 10 four-year, Tennessee state public institutions. We coordinated with VETS administrators to distribute the veteran student survey using their distribution lists. Our target population of administrators was 10. Our combined target population of veteran students came from the VETS approved institutions listed in Table 2. The restricted scope of this project and the barriers to human subject access limited our sample population by convenience to the campuses who either accepted Vanderbilt IRB approval or granted their own IRB approval and distributed the survey to their veteran students. One campus declined to distribute the veteran student survey. We administered the surveys during a 45-day

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<sup>5</sup> We obtained Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from Vanderbilt University. IRB administrators withheld permission to survey students on campuses due to questions establishing sub-groups and the limited number of students who could be in certain groups. For instance, the discerning reader may have been able to identify a student retired from the Navy and utilizing the Montgomery GI Bill. Accordingly, we removed these questions from the instrument.

period in the Fall semester of 2018. We provided an information sheet with frequently asked questions to facilitate discussion at veteran student organization meetings and posting within the veteran student support centers (see Appendix D). Using the Qualtrics platform as a host, we separately provided the veteran student survey and the administrator survey to one administrator at each of the 10 institutions. The administration then provided an electronic link to all veteran students via campus email. We sent two reminder emails to administrators ensure a higher student response rate—one at the beginning of week three and one at the beginning of week four. The instructions also provided an explanation of the importance of this study in the improvement of educational benefits to veteran students, but no financial incentive. We felt any financial incentive might diminish the moral value in answering these questions from the veteran students from these institutions (Coughlin et al., 2011).

Eight of ten administrators responded. Seven of ten institutions distributed the survey to students via email. From the approximately 6,200 veteran students attending the sample institutions, 117 responded (1.9%). No missing data were identified for the variables utilized, and equal weighting was allocated to each participant. There are three independent variables: state policy, institutional efforts, student (veteran and dependent) navigation. We selected the dependent variables to support Schlossberg's description of the veteran student transition. These are self, situation, support, and strategy. We used the remaining expressive results to compare with responses provided by administrators.

**Interview Data.** Our qualitative study employed a descriptive, semi-structured, standardized, open-ended interview method to "uncover the basic dimensions of the school as a social organization... and student's progress through it". The research team created an interview protocol oriented around Schlossberg's Transition Theory and Braxton's Retention Theory. This approach allowed our team to better understand the "processes, relationship, settings and situations, systems and people" (Peshkin, 1993, p.24) involved in Tennessee public universities related to veteran student transition. Through qualitative methods, we could more clearly see the state and university roles in veteran student transitions through an academic environment (Peshkin, 1993). Open-ended interviews allowed for greater insight into how the state and institutional past and present situations and settings influence the "social dynamics of the university" (Peshkin, 1993). Additionally, these methods provided an understanding of the complex institutional and social systems surrounding veteran students and the university and how these forces continually interact with one another (Peshkin, 1993).

We designed the Institutional Administrator Qualitative Protocol (see Appendix E) to investigate three major bins of our research: policy, transition, and retention. Policy influenced the situation of the veteran student support centers within the institutional organization, assignment of resources and inclusion of VETS administrators and student voices in policymaking. State and institutional policy and efforts as defined by Schlossberg's 4S framework facilitated or hindered veteran student transition. Specific questions focused on student completion on and post-baccalaureate transition. Retention efforts bridged the gap between access and completion with keys of veteran student identification and tracking.

We conducted five interviews with campus veterans' coordinators, two locally-governed institutes and three campuses of the UT system, as well as one with a THEC staff member who works directly with veteran student support. We chose these campuses to provide a variety of size, geographic location, concentration of veteran students, delivery methods of veteran student support. Researchers scheduled interviews and conducted them during the school day in the Veteran Student Center Offices or administrators' offices. We chose these locations as they were quiet and places where the administrators felt comfortable. Additionally, we interviewed one support person in an auxiliary campus building and one VETS administrator by phone.

Researchers interviewed each administrator individually to allow for the candidness, memory, and consistency necessary to help determine the efficacy of veteran student programs (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). We conducted the THEC interview in that staff member's office. Each interview lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes. Researchers electronically recorded all interviews.

**Documents and Archival Data.** For each of the five interview sites, we conducted a review of a variety of naturally occurring documents to provide information, context, and history on the institutional support of the veteran student's transition. We reviewed documents and artifacts to provide background information to inform the context of the services available to the veteran students. This included personal, official, and popular culture documents. These items can be grouped into two main categories - administrative and operational. We categorize administrative documents as the primary documents for the official organization of the school. These include the THEC VETS and institutional websites, and veteran student enrollment data. The process for the collection of these data began with a review of institutional websites and digital presence before interviews which evaluated the using a digital protocol (see Appendix F). The websites provided informed questions for the administrators and provided insight into what programs were available and communicated to veteran students. Understanding how this communication occurs at each school is important to understand the support and strategies provided to veteran students. The enrollment rates served to confirm THEC data. Though in most cases, the enrollment data were the same previously submitted to THEC and subsequently provided to the research team.

The second primary category is operational documents. These include program announcements, employer visits, federal and state veterans financial and medical funds, grant and scholarship opportunities, Veteran Student Center operating hours, campus signage and social networking sites such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. These operational items represent substantive information about program availability and participation, and the importance of information that the school advocates in promoting veteran student transition.

**Observations.** While at the universities, the interview team observed the college environment and veteran student transition that the community symbolically and physically communicated in public spaces and veteran student support centers. We

documented these observations using the protocol informed by the Schlossberg transition theory (see Appendix G) Observations of the symbols around the school examined the consistency between the messages the institution is attempting to promote. While institutions express a value for veteran students, how do symbols in centers, hallways, offices, public signage represent the ideals of the school? We noted observations of the physical spaces and the activity within. How do veteran students interact with non-veteran students? How welcoming and or accessible is the space? These observations were pivotal in understanding veteran student use of centers in their transition strategies. Lastly, we made observations on how well the digital presence represented the physical space. These observations assisted in understanding communication between the institution and its veteran students. In whole, these observations provided emphasis for questions on the interview protocol and better allowed for interviewees to connect with the interview questions.

Table 4 summarizes our data collection. Letters A thru J identifies each of the ten campuses. The numbers indicate the number of surveys, visits, interviews, or protocols completed at that site.

| <b>Campus</b>           | <b>A</b> | <b>B</b> | <b>C</b> | <b>D</b> | <b>E</b> | <b>F</b> | <b>G</b> | <b>H</b> | <b>I</b> | <b>J</b> | <b>THEC</b> |
|-------------------------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|-------------|
| VETS Data               | 1        | 1        | 1        | 1        | 1        | 1        | 1        | 1        | 1        | 1        | N/A         |
| Administrator Survey    | 1        | 1        | 1        | 1        | 1        | 1        | 1        | 1        | 0        | 0        | 1           |
| Student Survey (note 1) | 0        | 0        |          |          |          | 117      |          |          |          | 0        | N/A         |
| Digital Protocol        | 1        | 1        | 1        | 1        | 1        | 0        | 0        | 0        | 0        | 0        | N/A         |
| Qualitative Interview   | 3        | 1        | 1        | 1        | 1        | 0        | 0        | 0        | 0        | 0        | 1           |
| Phone Interview         | 0        | 0        | 0        | 0        | 0        | 0        | 0        | 0        | 0        | 0        | N/A         |
| Site Visit              | 1        | 1        | 1        | 1        | 1        | 0        | 0        | 0        | 0        | 0        | N/A         |

Note 1. 117 responses received from institutions C thru J. Blanks indicate no data are available.

*Table 4. Descriptive Data: Number of Responses by Campus*

## Methods

**Data Analysis Plan and Coding Scheme.** Consistent with the conceptual framework and interview protocol, we oriented our data analysis for this research project around the three guiding bins of policy, transition, and retention (see Figure 3).

Our research identified several prominent elements associated with each bin based on previous research. State policy efforts govern college enrollment, payments, as well as institutional efforts towards their retention and persistence. Transition requires knowledge of self, and an understanding of one’s situation and the development of strategies to use available support. Institutions define their retention challenges by enrollment, financial, social, and career transitions and the capacity to successfully navigate these transitions.

**Quantitative Analysis.** THEC institutional reports and the student survey responses comprised the quantitative data<sup>6</sup>. We ran descriptive statistics of the THEC data to support findings in research question 1. Specifically, we compared institutional enrollment totals reported for the implementation year, pre- and post-designation to VETS program. Once the data were collected from the student survey, we ran two statistical analyses to provide further insight into research questions 2 and 3. First, to determine the difference between veteran and dependent student behavior, we used a series of paired t-tests to compare the means of the independent variables of self, situate, support and strategy to veteran student status. We evaluate the relationship between GI Bill use and financial counseling with a t-test. Second, the Pearson's chi-squared test of independence was used to determine the distribution of frequencies when examining the relationship between marital status, frequency their veteran status, and their veteran status.

**Qualitative Analysis.** To analyze the administrative data from interviews, we followed a standardized, 4-step process. This process included assessing the experience in totality, listening to and transcribing each interview, coding each transcription with a concept clustered matrix, and compiling the concept-clustered matrices in a master matrix to extrapolate larger themes and narratives from our research.

**Analytic Memo.** We began with a preliminary analysis of the overall experience of the qualitative survey. Team members documented the work to-date in an analytic memo, used to identify common understandings and disparate observations for further discussions.

**Listening Tour.** This listening tour was comprised of a minimum of three audio reviews per interview recording by different members of the research team. Through the tour, our team gained familiarity with each interview as we identified key themes and concepts and selected illustrative quotes to be highlighted in the next phase of rigorous analysis using a concept-clustered matrix. As a part of the listening tour, we transcribed each interview using NVIVO transcription software. Each researcher then reviewed and corrected his or her own transcription for accuracy. We shared the recordings in a secure, online repository provided by Vanderbilt University and accessible only by the researchers.

**Coding by Matrix.** Using data identified through the listening tours and transcriptions, the research team employed a concept-clustered matrix to analyze each individual interview around the bins of our project along with distinct categories for administrators and veteran students. We utilized intercoder reliability and had multiple members code each interview. The interviews provided additional data points to mitigate deficiencies in the quantitative survey sampling process. The use of the modified ACE survey (McBain, Kim, Cook, & Snead, 2012) increased the reliability of the qualitative instrument and provided a source for comparison. The next step of our process moved

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<sup>6</sup> As THEC data were not individualized we were not able to compare the performance of individual campuses or students. Further, no longitudinal analysis was possible with a data set of only two years. We used these THEC data to support findings in research question 1.

our focus toward the systematic analysis of all interviews and survey data conducted by category roles and location. For each survey, we created plots to depict responses and subsequently coded them into NVIVO. In recognition of time and financial limitations, and the threat to validity and reliability these limitations bring, the provided matrices aided in the visualization of how the themes, quotes, plots, observations, and documents from our campus and THEC visits and surveys connect to the bins in our conceptual framework. This protocol leveraged the information gained from the listening tour and organized in a systematic and uniform process.

**Master Matrix.** Step four of the protocol required us to compile each individual interview matrix into a master concept-clustered matrix from the administrator interview and survey categories. While developing the master matrices, we were careful to represent high-level themes and exemplary quotes. We also supported each theme with the direct evidence of a corresponding quote and, where appropriate, a survey generated plot. We supplemented the interview quotes with open-ended survey question responses. We used NVIVO tools to evaluate bin elements with low evidence levels and took actions to ensure a diversity of representation from source documents. We used word and thematic queries and evaluated coverage from each interview. The master matrix analysis informed findings and discussion sections of this study.

**Strengths and Limitations.** The mixed-methods approach to this study takes advantage of the strengths of two research approaches. Qualitative research made possible deeper and broader insight into the realities of individual experiences. Quantitative data provide objectivity from which to establish a frame of reference, but also inform the perceptions of interviewees. This study experienced hindrances of external reliability. The lack of inferential capacity in this study weakens and limits the generalizability of this study to the context of Tennessee institutions. As such, the feasibility of our sample leaves our veteran student study subject to sampling bias, making it difficult to generalize our results beyond the students sampled for this project.

The use of purposive sampling of veteran students on campuses—coupled with the need for the cooperation of campus directors—increases the likelihood of error as the population willing to respond to the survey likely are fundamentally different from those who do not answer the survey. For example, VETS administrators encouraged visiting and work-study students present in veteran student centers to complete the survey. These students are likely to have experienced and benefited from the support provided by the center. Further, those who did not answer the survey are likely the veteran students from whom institutions and policymakers most need information. The investigators strengthened the findings by conducting qualitative interviews informed by both the administrator and student surveys' findings. Qualitative interviews with administrators allowed us to understand the administrators in their social and organizational contexts. This provided us the opportunity to explore the influence these contexts have on behaviors and experiences. The provision of greater context will strengthen the findings. Limitations by IRB to interview students on campus eliminated the comparative capacity of the student survey results.



To reduce threats to internal reliability we used three strategies in this study. Verbatim accounts of participant conversations, precise descriptions of field notes and observations, and direct quotations from documents and surveys support our analysis. The researchers corroborated evidence with quantitative data, when available. Finally, we recorded data using mechanical recorders and took photographs during the campus visits.

In isolating our study to four-year public institutions, we limit the generalizability of our findings to other contexts and introduce setting effects to external validity issues. The sample populations lose generalizability to all postsecondary institutions in Tennessee as these veteran students are likely older and possess prior educational success. Readers should use this analysis with caution as an indicator of issues at other post-secondary institutions. Accordingly, the investigators must establish the validity of this study in the appropriate context and exercise caution in the reporting of results. The THEC institutional data showed a wide variance in quality and accuracy submitted as evidenced by disparities in the reported data and the information held in THEC's Student Information System (SIS).

## **Results**

### **RQ 1: What state policies exist to influence veteran student transition at Tennessee public universities?**

Using the data collected from the THEC, the administrator survey, administrator interviews, and website protocol, we conducted quantitative and qualitative analyses to identify the state policies and their effectiveness for veterans. We use descriptive statistics to demonstrate the effect of state policies across Tennessee public universities.

#### **RQ 1.1: What state policies exist to influence veteran student transition at Tennessee public universities?**

In Tennessee, policy formation surrounding veterans occupies a privileged position amongst state policymakers due to the large voting contingent of veterans and military-affiliated individuals, families, and businesses. Data provided from VETS reporting, statutes from the Tennessee Code Annotated, publicly marketed policies, and information gained from qualitative sources highlighted the multiple ways in which state and institutional create policies. As one interviewee stated, "All you have to do is mention veteran over there (the General Assembly) and the bill will get passed." In 2019, the legislature filed 37 bills in the General Assembly to support veterans, including one that would award an automatic undergraduate degree to any veteran with twenty years of service (Tennessee General Assembly HB0126 & SB0347, 2019). Though unlikely to pass due to implications for accreditation, aiding veterans is a key issue for many legislators, especially those surrounding Fort Campbell and Arnold Air Force Base. Using Kingdon's (1984) Revised Garbage Can model, veterans not only occupy large areas of

the policy streams but represent a strategic population that advocates can provide leverage to several issues and policies seeking preeminence. At the state level, policymakers leverage multiple state agencies—Tennessee Department of Veterans Services, THEC, and TN Economic and Community Development—as well as standard lobbying activities to craft policies for veterans. The information gathering stage of policy development is the primary access point for veteran student input.

Since 2014, three legislative initiatives—Helping Heroes, Tennessee Strong, and the VETS program—connected veterans and higher education. In alignment with the organizational responsibilities of a state higher education executive office, THEC operates as the regulatory agency (State Authorizing Agent) for the VA, as well as a primary policy advocate for veteran students as seen through the VETS and Veteran Reconnect program. Due to their organizational placement, THEC regularly works with state lawmakers advising legislative measures to equip veterans with the educational experiences they need to translate to a quality career.

Institutions follow federal and state policies directed toward veterans' education. Tennessee state policy funds higher education institutions through an Outcomes Based Funding (OBF) model facilitated by THEC. Nested within the OBF, Quality Assurance Funding (QAF) allows institutions the freedom to focus on strategic initiatives whose success is based on retention and completion numbers making QAF the primary funding measure associated with veteran success. Within Quality Assurance Funding (QAF), each institution prioritizes five targeted populations for whom it commits to improving outcomes over five years, in exchange for additional state funds on top of what the institutions receive as part of the OBF.

All ten public universities are VETS campuses. VETS universities submit student performance data to THEC through a mandatory form. This submission is in addition to the mandatory use of the state Student Information System (SIS). To date, THEC does not use VETS data for decision making efforts, as deference is given to data from the SIS. THEC uses SIS data, in part, to determine OBF and QAF allocations. By linking funding to data, THEC staff feel data quality is improving (Whitfield, 2017). Four universities—ETSU, MTSU, UM, and UTC—selected veteran students as a targeted population in response to state fiscal policy. UTK and UTHSC are the only two universities which have not won a Veterans Reconnect grant. Following these state policies incentivizing veteran student access since 2014, institutions in Tennessee have increased both the scope and visibility of their veterans' offerings.

Table 5 displays state policies and programs, how they originated, who and how they target a population, and which category—access, retention, transition, completion, or reporting—the initiative is designed to accomplish. Programs originated by THEC—Veteran Reconnect and PLA—combined with statutory policy initiatives orient primarily around access and the initial transition of veterans onto campus. Only Helping Heroes—which supports National Guard members—and the state's Quality Assurance Funding measures and rewards support retention and completion efforts. Most state policy

focuses on the access and transition, with a noticeable gap on programs designed to promote completion and the transition out of education and into a career.

Table 5. *Tennessee Policies Influencing Veteran Student Access, Transition, and Retention*

| <b>Policy</b>                                | <b>Origin</b>                   | <b>Target Population</b>                      | <b>Award</b>   | <b>Category</b> |
|--|---------------------------------|---|--|-----------------|
| Quality Assurance Funding                    | Legislation, 1978 <sup>1</sup>  | Veteran Students                              | Institutions can voluntarily opt-in to veteran students as a target population for completion. Increasing graduation rates lead to small increases in funding on top of the state's Outcomes Based Funding formula | Completion      |
| Helping Heroes                               | Legislation, 2013 <sup>2</sup>  | Tennessee Veterans or National Guard members  | \$1000 dollars a semester for taking >12 hours; \$500 for taking 6-11 hours  | Retention       |
| Veterans Education Transition Support (VETS) | Legislation, 2014 <sup>3</sup>  | Institutions                                  | Public Designation   | Reporting       |
| Veterans Reconnect                           | THEC Program, 2015 <sup>4</sup> | Institutions                                  | Targeted grants in increase capacity to serve veteran students   | Transition      |
| Veterans Reconnect PLA                       | Legislation, 2016 <sup>5</sup>  | Veteran students                              | Development of a process for statewide PLA for credit  | Transition      |
| Tennessee Reconnect                          | Legislation, 2017 <sup>6</sup>  | All Tennessee adults without a college degree | Mentorship and last-dollar aid to cover tuition for certificate or Associate's degree-seeking students   | Access          |
| Tennessee STRONG                             | Legislation, 2017 <sup>7</sup>  | Tennessee National Guard members              | Tuition reimbursement over a four-year period  | Access          |

Notes:

1. THEC, 2018g.

2. TSAC, 2013.

3. Tennessee VETS Act, 2014.

4. THEC, 2018f.

5. Tennessee VETS Act, 2016, pc 3.

6. THEC, 2018d.

7. Tennessee STRONG Act, 2017.

## RQ 1.2: How do Tennessee’s four-year public educational institutions identify veteran students?

Confusion around language has prevented accurate reporting of veteran students. Colloquial use may presuppose an equation of veteran to combat. Confusion abounds between qualifying types of discharge (honorable, administrative, medical, dishonorable), time served, commission or enlistment, regular or reserve forces. Individual service members may refrain from associating as a veteran, despite these terms being well-defined by the services. Prior to VETS, campuses reported veteran student enrollment by reporting only those students who utilized their GI Bill educational benefits. VETS changed the identification collection methods to add self-identification to report veteran students on their campus more accurately. Admissions offices in the state now include multiple identification points beginning in the admissions process. In 2015—a year after VETS legislation passed—Veterans Enrollment increased at most universities. Figure 5 shows the increase in enrollment when institutions included VETS data veteran student enrollment for 2016. Comparisons of veteran student enrollment reporting from the SIS (Pre-VETS) and those from required VETS (Post-VETS) reporting show substantial differences. VETS reporting indicates much higher veteran student and dependent enrollment than that recorded in the state SIS. This discrepancy raises questions about the state’s—and institution’s—ability to accurately assess the necessary statistics of this student population.

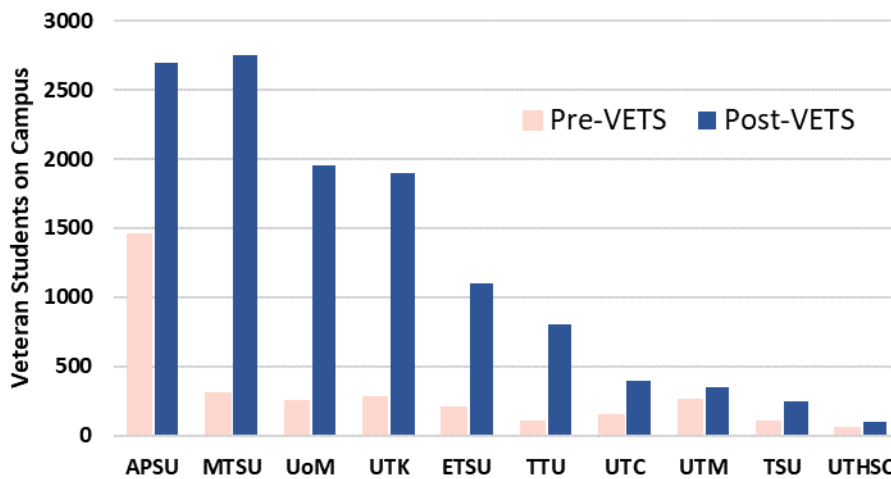


Figure 5. *Veteran/Dependent Totals Pre-Post VETS 2016*

Data Source: THEC, 2017

As shown in Figure 6, with the inclusion of this additional data, nine of the ten universities experienced substantial enrollment increases. Institutions adjusted their data gathering methods to include admissions applications, orientation registration, course registration, facility use, and other veteran student program attendance. Institutional reporting of veteran and dependent reporting remained flat between 2008-2015. In 2015, 9 of the 10 institutions reported substantial jumps in enrollment of these students with the

largest gains at APSU, MTSU, and UTK. By 2017, reporting appears to show a decline from 2015 and 2016 totals. This is likely due to the complexity of the THEC-provided collection form, and decreasing institutional priority for data collection and focus on the accuracy of reporting.

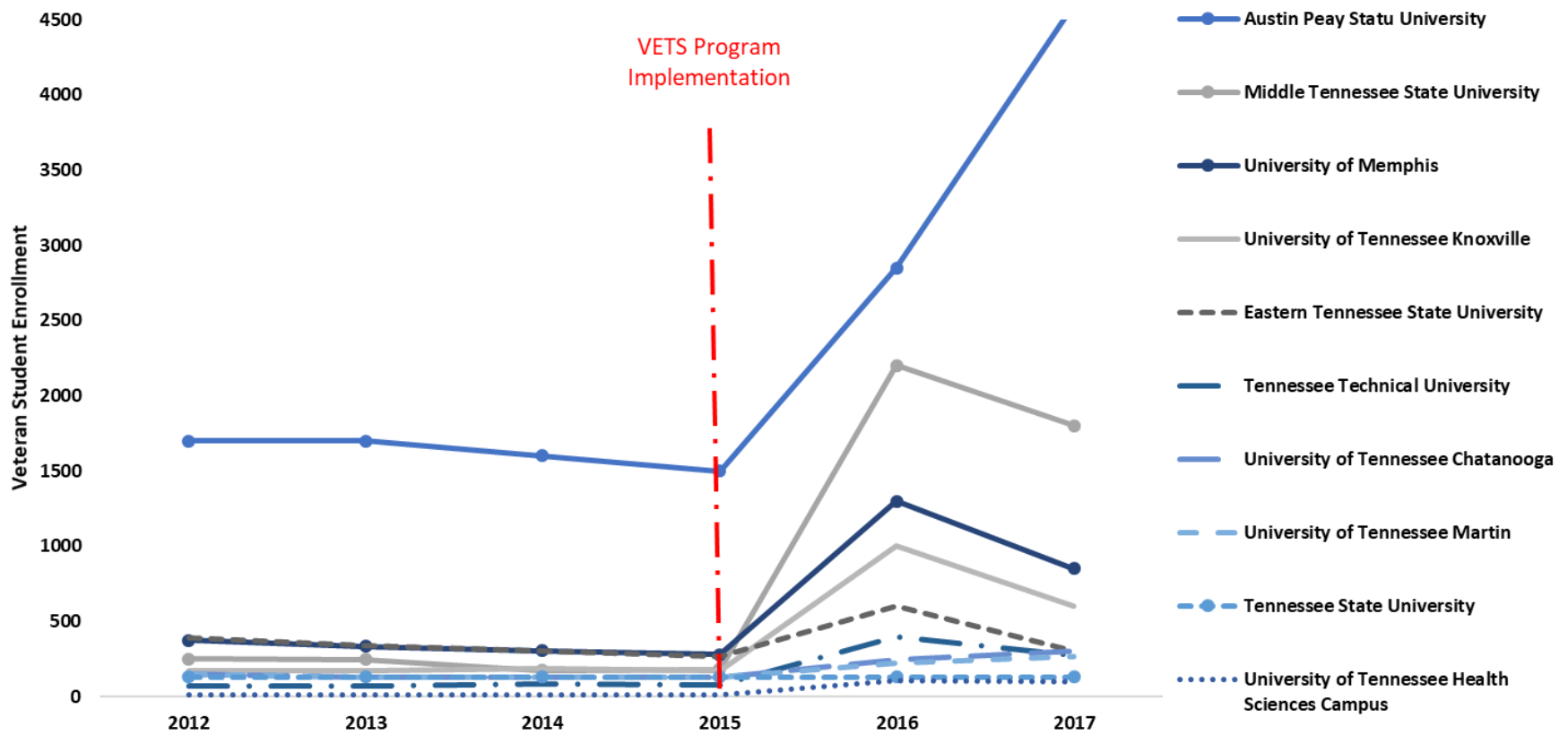


Figure 6. VETS Enrollment at Tennessee Four-Year Public Universities

Data Source: THEC, 2017

THEC receives both reports, but VETS reporting captures significantly greater veteran students and dependent enrollment. All campuses reported a formal system of identification, and all acknowledge that the same formal system fails to capture all students eligible for veteran student center services. In response, VETS administrators reported efforts to create a variety of programming and events with the expressed goal of recruiting existing veteran students to their centers. Figure 7 represents the many processes that encompass veteran identification. While making promising improvements, not all campuses have specific services designed for sub-groupings of veteran students and their dependents. For example, only two of eight surveyed institutions reported support groups for women veterans, and only three offered support groups for veterans with disabilities. THEC is statutorily mandated to submit student surveys to institutions as a part of VETS reporting, but to date, no survey has been sent.

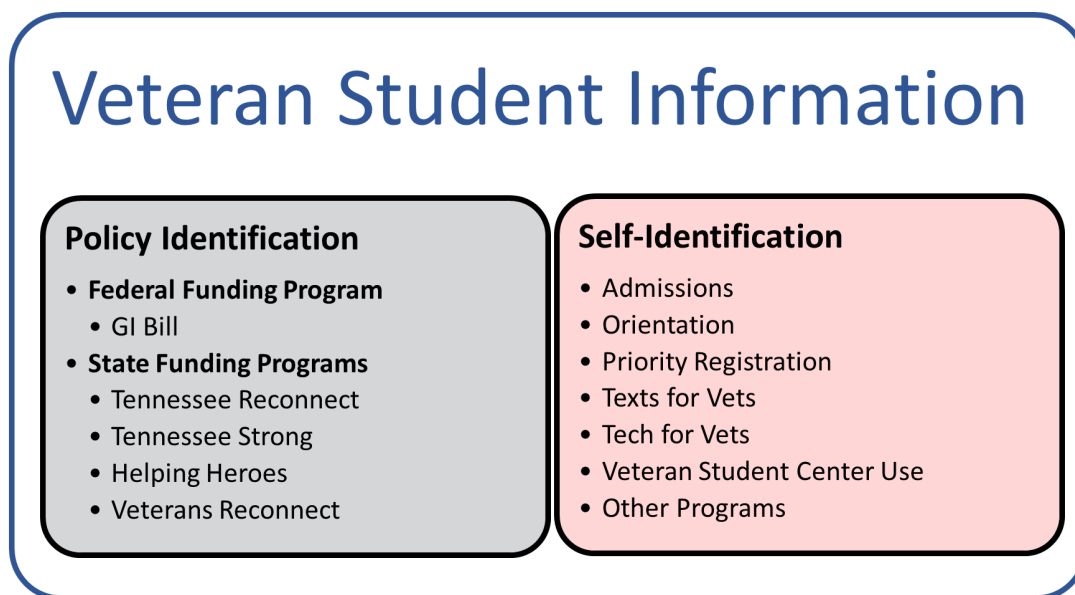


Figure 7. *Veteran Student Identification Gathering Methods*

Dependents represent a large service population that comprises a large service population on each campus. In 2017, VETS data show that of all reporting campuses, 66% of the service-related population, were veteran students, whereas 34% were dependent students. Figure 8 shows the percentage of dependent students on each university campus in 2017. UTM, TSU, and UTK reported the highest percentage of veteran dependents amongst their populations. With ETSU and the U of M approaching 40% themselves, supports for veteran dependents appears to be a strong need on half of the university campuses in Tennessee.



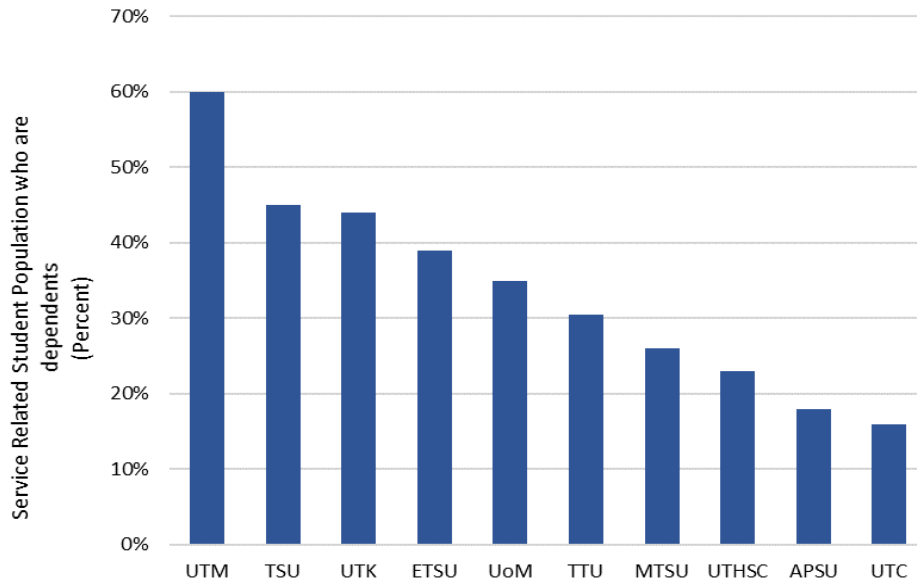


Figure 8. *Percent of Dependents at Each Tennessee Four-year Public Institution.*

Data Source: THEC, 2017

The institutional process involves tagging self-identified veteran students with a unique tracking code. However, as VETS data revealed, a wide variance of institutional reporting exists. Schools inconsistently counted GI Bill usage with and without self-identification and dependent enrollment. Further, multiple submissions lacked required information on the utilized benefit. Institutions report their reporting capacities limited by information technology or by formal veterans' services.

As we will discuss in the next research question, those who oversee veteran student resources on a campus influences the quality of data made available to THEC by the institution. At some campuses, the veteran's director has direct military experience as an enlisted person, officer and even as a former veteran student. Some bring a familial military connection, and others come with occupational affiliations as Veterans Administration certifying officials. These diverse backgrounds color their approaches to locate non-GI Bill using veteran students, with varying accuracy and precision of data quality. Incomplete data forms the basis of the veteran's policy in Tennessee. THEC and some institutions are making efforts to address this issue, but as of Spring 2019, discrepancies remain.

**RQ 1.3: How do Tennessee public universities communicate policies to veteran students?**

*"It's like a thousand-piece puzzle"*—Campus Administrator

Based on administrator interviews and responses from administrator surveys institutions reported appreciation for the policies that THEC facilitates for their departments; however, veterans administrators recognize that, ultimately, veteran

student success is dependent on their institutional efforts.<sup>7</sup> One administrator said, “We have a great working relationship with THEC and TDVS, the policies helped our leadership understand we have a large veterans population that needs to be served”. One campus uses student contribution to establish and evolve new policies or programs, indicating they find veteran student voice as valued and influential. One respondent stated, “I work hard to try and encourage our veterans to get involved in leadership roles on campus, at a minimum I try to make sure they have a seat at the table when we make policies that affect them”. However, according to directors, veteran students seem reticent to become involved in campus activities, preferring to keep their time on campus limited to academic and administrative duties. Accordingly, institutions have shifted their offerings to items veteran students identify as particular challenges - financial and academic advising.

Campus directors indicated a desire to do more, but unsure of how to better integrate their veteran students into the larger campus population. Accordingly, university campuses are largely serving access and transition needs for students. Said one director, “We are focused on the transition from military to campus life, seeking gaps, and trying to mitigate them”. While these needs serve integral roles in the aid of veteran students coming to campus, respondents reported a desire to have help with the retention and overall transition from college-to-career for veteran students. This focus, elaborated in the research question 3, emerges from the noticeable lack of policies supporting retention and veteran persistence. Despite working to create and implement policies to support veteran students, the glaring lack of data quality regarding veterans’ presence and performance limit state and institution efforts.

State policies play an extensive role in transitioning veteran students from military to university life. To encourage students to utilize state policy opportunities, various veteran student websites highlight various resources available to veteran students by the states (see Table 6). The University of Tennessee at Knoxville’s Veteran Student Services website provides information about both Department of Veteran Affairs benefits such as the GI Bill and Yellow Ribbon Commission as well as Tennessee state policies including the TN Veterans Education Transition Support (VETS) Program, TN Strong Act, and TN Helping Heroes Grant. Directly related to the VETS Act, UTK provides access to the THEC Guide for Evaluating Military Experiences for Academic Credit that is critical in granting veterans academic credit for transferable training and military experience. The UTK Veteran Student Services website also provides a link to the US Army’s website that outlines the above-mentioned Tennessee Military and Veterans Education Benefits. Additionally, the site also provides information about its Veterans’ UPWARD Bound (VUB) program.

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<sup>7</sup> A few institutions have also implemented Green Zone or similar training and have become involved in national veteran students' organizations and collaboratives. These actions create capacity that is adept at the initial access and transition onto campus while also increasing their ability to support veterans as they matriculate through a campus.

Unlike the UTK website, Austin Peay State University's (APSU) Office of Veterans Affairs does not provide information about the VETS Act; however, it does provide information about the TN Helping Heroes Grant, TN Promise, TN Reconnect, TN lottery, and TN Strong. APSU's Office of Veterans Affairs website does not display information about APSU's VUB, while APSU's admissions page does. APSU Office of Veteran Affairs website provides links to the Department of Veteran Affairs and resources related to the GI Bill, Yellow Ribbon Program, and other VA education benefits programs. Only APSU and UTC provide information about the Tennessee Board of Regents (TBR) Veterans' Dependent Post-Secondary Education Assistance that is an amendment to Tennessee Code that "every dependent child of certain veterans or spouses of certain veterans may receive educational assistance in the form of a waiver of tuition, maintenance fees, activity fees, and/or required registration and/or matriculation fees."

MTSU's Charlie and Hazel Daniels Veterans and Military Family Center website does provide links to information about the GI Bill benefits and eligibility, generalized information about selecting the best fit GI Bill, and federal grants and scholarship programs. While the site does provide a link to a tutorial in determining the best benefit for a student, the link is dead and leads to an empty page indicating either a need for maintenance or inattention. MTSU connects students with information about the TN Helping Heroes Grant and TN Strong Act. However, there is no information about the TN VETS Act. The website provides guidance in determining military credits that transfer for academic credit, but it does not provide THEC's Guide for Evaluating Military Experiences for Academic Credit.

Both MTSU and UTM lack a VUB program. While UTM provides a lot of information on TN Helping Heroes Grant and TN Strong Act, the site does not provide any information about any TN Promise. However, the site does provide information on TN Reconnect, the Yellow Ribbon Program, and other scholarships and grants for veteran students and their dependents. The website includes only basic information about military experience for academic credit and prior learning assessment. Even though it UTM's Veteran Affairs website highlights that is a VETS campus on the homepage, the site does not provide information about the VETS Act which established the VETS Campus certification.

The UTC Veteran Student Services webpage provides many resources for veteran students. The website provides information about the GI Bill, the Yellow Ribbon Program, and other Department of Veteran Affairs Education and Training Benefits. Unlike the other institutional websites reviewed, UTC's Veteran Student Services webpage provides a benefit comparison tool for students. Related to Tennessee state policy, the webpage provides material about the TN Strong Act as well as a link to the application packet. The site also provides information about TN VETS Act. Details about the TN Helping Heroes Grant can only be accessed through the Office of Financial Aid & Scholarships site under the category "Types of Students". UTC does provide easily accessible information and guides regarding receiving credit for military service.

Communicating with potential veteran students is a challenge. In the survey, both students and administrators reported using targeted email and on-campus advisors to

learn about programs and policies. However, students reported email fatigue. Administrators are aware of this potential overuse and limit email transmissions by bundling messages and using social media such as Twitter and Facebook. Students capitalize on web-based advertisements more than the dedicated websites that institutions established for their veteran's population. Peer word of mouth effectively draws other students. One administrator reflected, "Vets bring other vets". Another institutional tactic to increase publicity of veteran student services is central location. Universities have located most centers in high traffic areas such as the library or student center. As a result, more students walk past. However, this brings its own disadvantage of noise and exposure, both of which we address later.

## **RQ 2: What institutional efforts exist and how do they affect veteran student transition at Tennessee public universities?**

Using the data collected from the administrator survey, administrator interviews, website protocol, and document review, we conducted a qualitative analysis to identify the institutional practices and their effectiveness for veterans. We use descriptive statistics to demonstrate the iniquitousness of institutional efforts across Tennessee public universities.

### **RQ 2.1: What dedicated veterans services and resources have institutions adopted to ease veteran student transition and assimilation into college?**

All institutions provided dedicated veteran services, and most have adopted veterans' centers as the preferred method of delivering services with a heavy focus on the veteran students' transition. Applying Schlossberg's framework, institutions worked to help students identify with the institution, established programs and policies to develop veteran student and academic community mutual appreciation, provided support, and established—or refrained from establishing—strategies around the ultimate success of veteran students and veteran dependents. Three campuses use veteran student advisory panels to identify support programs within the centers. Two of those panels continue to support their centers, with positive responses from administrators. Ultimately, the success of the transition of this population, in the eyes of Drive to 55, is the attainment of a degree from the student's matriculated university.

#### ***Self.***

Given the complexities that characterize many veteran students, integrating them into campus life requires institutions seeking to establish rapport in a manner that goes beyond what other students necessitate. Rapport building begins with the relationship of the student and the administrator they encounter in the veteran's office. In response, some campuses establish a variety of celebrations for veterans to mark key academic transitions to help them feel valued by the institution and the center.

The characteristics of administrators on the campus are critical to students identifying with veterans' services on a campus. Based on interviews, if the administrator has direct experience as an enlisted service member, students report greater affinity and willingness to engage with services and programs. One administrator interviewed explained, "Students identify with me due to my service. Had I been non-military or an officer, they would not be as forthcoming." Officers and non-military administrators are not any less capable in these roles, but shared experiences of the parties may aid in students' willingness to integrate onto campus by showing the student a success story that completed the journey they are on.

Using data to initiate institutional action is one-way campuses can better serve their veteran populations. At two institutions, the administrative staffs respond proactively once their internal systems trigger a student as a veteran, typically through veteran-specific admissions questions. Administrative staff reach out to begin relationship building with the student. At MTSU this involves invitations to visit the newly commissioned Charlie and Hazel Daniels Veterans and Military Family Center. APSU is constructing a new facility to become the gathering space for the roughly 25% of its student body with a military affiliation. Initiating relationships and having a centralized location aid in establishing meaning for students. Over 40% of the students surveyed responded to using the campus center, academic advising, and tutoring for veterans, and social events marketed by their veterans' office. In response, one administrator acknowledged the best way to develop relationships was through constant contact with the student.

Accordingly, the campus veterans' team is proactive around identified challenging seasons—registration, aid disbursement, drop/add, midterms and finals, etc.—and tracks response rates by students to ensure they are not attempting to navigate the college environment alone. Helping the student realize they "are part of a team" is an institutional goal meant to create solidarity and engagement with the student. One administrator shared, "This demonstrates that when the military support staff are able to collaborate with other offices and centers on the campus, veteran student engagement opportunities increase." On another campus, since adopting a similar connecting strategy to help students integrate themselves into campus, their administrator commented, "We've seen improvements in almost everything." By surrounding support in each step of a student's journey on campus, these campuses are rejecting traditional approaches that left the priority of responsibility on the veteran students and is opting instead for high-intensity advising and constant contact to communicate the value they hold in the veteran.

### ***Situation.***

A campus administrator reported, "Our veteran students have to understand that they are not in the military anymore. The lack of structure on campus will swallow many of them up before they realize what is happening". This response exemplifies campus administrator sentiments of the need to situate veteran students on their campus. Understanding how to navigate the loosely-coupled organization of the American university is difficult for many students, even more so for many veterans who spent prior years in the tightly-coupled organization of the armed forces. Transitioning from the

military can be a time of anomie for veterans and ensuring veterans are positively situated on campus is critical to success.

To combat the potential for anomie, institutions work to orient students to their campuses. Each administrator interviewed offered orientation activities to welcome and extend knowledge to students. They also discussed outreach efforts with community non-profits and VA programs meant to support veterans. Central to these goals is to “help make sure the student knows they have a strong community fabric”. Further, they work to orient the campuses to veteran students to make the campus better prepared and inclusive of veterans. APSU designated one of their home football games for veterans, current military, and their families featuring an on-field ceremony to bring awareness to their contributions to the campus community. UTK celebrates and informs veteran student past and present with a Vet of the Game at many sporting event half-times throughout the year. MTSU holds various ceremonies each year with extensive and impressive guests lists. The most important of these is the Stole ceremony—honoring graduating veteran students with a bright red stole that clashes with blue graduation robes to help highlight the tremendous achievement of the student. The sharing of personal stories simultaneously can be an effective coping mechanism for veteran students and an enlightenment vehicle for the campus community (Ryan et al, 2011). These strategies like these bring attention to the campus contributions of the veteran students.

As addressed in research question 1, the identification of students by the institution is critical helping students situate themselves onto the campus with targeted admissions, marketing, and announcements. Five of the campus administrators surveyed reported having designated admissions and enrollment individuals to serve as the primary liaison. Seven institutions engaged in admissions recruitment specifically targeting veteran students, with three sending admissions staff military bases for recruitment activities. Four institutions engaged in targeted email directed toward their veteran students. Despite outreach efforts, identification of veteran students poses an issue that three campuses reported as a major limiting factor. Considering this and in combination with the enrollment data, the shortcomings in the identification and definition of the campus' veteran population limit the effectiveness of institutional outreach.

### **RQ 2.2: How do institutions communicate with students about available veteran resources and services?**

As addressed in the first research question, identification issues make it challenging to communicate with students about the variety of resources and services intentionally designed for them. To engage veteran students, institutions develop numerous strategies to attract and recruit veteran students and veteran dependents and continue to promote their academic, personal, and professional growth. Institutions implement strategies that inform students of potential opportunities and help them navigate through college.

#### ***Strategies.***

Institutions are mostly engaged in localized student support strategies that allow the institution to meet the demands of their students. At MTSU, their center bases its strategies around Tinto's model for retention (Tinto, 1993). Their campus director, Dr. Hillary Miller, conducts scholarly research focused on the intersection of Tinto and veterans and ensures that the center's practices "all are rooted in empirical evidence". The degree to which the research informs practice varies on campuses. APSU and MTSU strategies strive to walk each veteran student through each financial aid and academic critical decision point to decrease mistakes and ambiguity. Though not shared by all campus, the focus on the full student lifecycle is central to their efforts. Said one administrator on another campus, "It's really more about finding every crack in the pipeline is covered and that any issues that may harm a veteran on campus are attended to". Contrast this with other institutions where veterans' services focused on ensuring fiscal and academic advising meet the needs of the veteran students at a basic level, while anything more is the student's responsibility. This difference may be the result of the center's organizational alignment functioning primarily as an academic or student services center and staffing their centers accordingly. Of the surveyed administrators, 75%, viewed increasing the number of staff dedicated to their target population as a moderate or high priority. Given the many roles veterans administrators play, additional support is a logical desire for these centers, as institutions become more aware of the latent and previously under-reported military populations on their campus.

**Website.**

Institutions invest a great number of resources to improve veteran student engagement on campus and use veteran services websites and social media to disseminate this information. While the robustness of the information varies among institutions, all five universities provided general contact information as well as details pertaining to the financial, admissions, social, and academic resources, and programming. Table 6 summarizes the data obtained following a review of these universities' digital presence. We used the digital presence protocol provided in Appendix F to standardize each review.

Table 6. *Summary of Data Obtained from Digital Presence Protocol*

| <b>Categories</b>                            | <b>APSU</b> | <b>MTSU</b> | <b>UTC</b> | <b>UTK</b> | <b>UTM<sup>2</sup></b> |
|--|-------------|-------------|------------|------------|------------------------|
| Contact Information                          | x           | x           | x          | x          | x                      |
| Federal Policy/Aid-Veteran Focus             |             |             |            |            |                        |
| GI Bill                                      | x           | x           | x          | x          | x                      |
| Yellow Ribbon Program                        | x           |             | x          | x          | x                      |
| VetSuccess on Campus (VSOC)                  | x           | x           |            |            |                        |
| Miscellaneous Veteran Specific Scholarships  | x           | x           | x          | x          | x                      |
| State Policy/Aid                             |             |             |            |            |                        |
| Tennessee Promise                            | x           |             |            |            |                        |
| Tennessee Reconnect                          | x           |             | x          |            | x                      |
| TN Helping Heroes Grant                      | x           | x           | x          | x          | x                      |
| TN STRONG Act                                | x           | x           | x          | x          | x                      |
| Veterans Reconnect                           |             | x           |            | x          | x                      |
| Veterans Education Transition Support (VETS) | x           | x           | x          | x          | x                      |

|   |   |   |   |   |   |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Veterans Reconnect PLA                                  |   |   |   |   |   |
| Admissions  |   |   |   |   |   |
| Veterans Pre-College Program                            |   |   |   | X |   |
| Instructions/Guide                                      | X | X | X | X | X |
| Social  |   |   |   |   |   |
| Veteran Center  | X | X | X | X | X |
| Programming   | X | X | X | X |   |
| Student Veterans of America - Chapter                   | X | X | X | X | X |
| Social Media Accounts                                   |   |   |   |   |   |
| Facebook  | X | X | X |   |   |
| Twitter   | X |   | X | X |   |
| Instagram   |   | X | X |   |   |
| Academic  |   |   |   |   |   |
| Tutoring and Advising                                   | X | X |   | X |   |
| Veterans Upward Bound Program                           | X |   |   | X |   |
| Green Zone  | X |   | X | X | X |
| Prior Learning Assessment (Military to Academic Credit) | X | X | X | X | X |
| Easy of Navigation Website                              | X |   |   | X |   |

Notes:

1. An X indicates the presence of this category on the institution's veteran center website. A blank indicates the lack of presence of this category on the institution's veteran center website.
2. Austin Peay State University (APSU), Middle Tennessee State University (MTSU), University of Tennessee Chattanooga (UTC), University of Tennessee Knoxville (UTK), University of Tennessee Martin (UTM)

Veteran services on UTK, APSU, MTSU, UTC, and UTM campuses have social media accounts, but their frequency of utilization varies. APSU, MTSU, and UTC actively update their Facebook posts and Twitter feeds. APSU advertises programming and opportunities available to veteran students and their dependents. UTK Veterans Resource Center maintains an active Twitter feed, but relies on its VOL Fighters, a Student Veterans of America chapter, to promote resources on Facebook. UTM does not have a social media presence.

UTC outlines a multitude of veteran and military support services available. The Student Veterans Lounge is directly linked to the UTC Veteran Student Services homepage. The webpage outlines the amenities available (e.g., television, coffee station, microwave), the operating hours (open 7 days a week from 7 am until as late as 10 pm), and welcoming photos of the space. A Veteran Student Services Computer Lab advertises having new desktop computers as well as free printing/scanning.

While UTK opened its Veterans Resource Center (VRC) in Fall 2017, the Veterans Student Services website does not do a great job promoting it. While UTK does not list the available resources on their site—the video on the UTK Veteran Student Services homepage allows for a few glimpses at the space. There was no hesitation in using the Tennessee orange in the VRC. The VRC is only open Monday through Friday from 8 am to 5 pm.

MTSU features the Veterans and Military Family Center on its website. Designed to enable the university's veteran student and veteran dependents to have a single location to meet a variety of academic needs, the Center is centrally located on campus. The space is 2,600 square feet and features a conference room, office spaces, adviser workspaces, student computer area, student lounge, and kitchenette. The location



provides a comfortable and safe space for discussions, study sessions, advising, and mentoring. While this site provides the resources necessary to assist students in navigating the various facets of college, the space is only open Monday through Friday from 8 am until 4:30 pm. Many centers are tracking student usage, either digitally or written, of the spaces, but nobody acknowledged leveraging data to determine operating hours.

The APSU website highlights its Military Student Center space. It is open to all students, not only military-affiliated students. The Military Student Center boasts a computer lab, dining area, lounge, programs, and student coaching. However, it is only open Monday through Thursday from 8 am to 5 pm, and Friday from 8 am to 4:30 pm.

UTM's Veteran Services website provides a brief description of its veterans' lounge, designed to serve veteran students, veteran dependents, and ROTC students. The picture of the space posted on the website makes the space appear very utilitarian. The space provides a refrigerator, microwave, and dining area to allow students an opportunity to socialize or work. There is no mention of programming or events at the veteran's lounge.

### ***Data Driven Communication.***

Identification issues discussed in research question 1 make difficult communication with veteran students. Institutions vary in the frequency and purpose behind their communications. Two of the campuses interviewed have more passive communications that focus on the dates of important actions and events. Other campuses leverage their data systems to offer real-time advising based on individual student needs. On a few campuses, veterans' administrators know when a student submits paperwork to drop a class, affording an opportunity to counsel the student on the impacts of GI Bill eligibility or on degree completion. This time-sensitive communication and advising is a key strategy for campuses to ensure veteran students are aware that the campus has services and support for them.

**RQ 2.3: What resources and services are available to veteran students as they transition in, through, and out of college?**

### ***Support.***

The supports institutions established serve to not only provide direct services to students but act as links to all aspects of their transitions. Programs facilitate self-identification, link students and faculty and leverage other campus programs—providing sense-making for students. Figure 9 presents the number of administrators who perceived veteran students use of offered services. Of the 8 administrator responses, 6 responded that the supports veteran students often used were the veteran students' center (80%), academic advising (80%) and VA educational benefits counseling (80%). Campus social and cultural events were least used, with only two administrators who responded that veteran students often used these facilities (25%). Administrators felt outside demands on veteran student time, specifically, families and employment, made extracurricular events less popular.

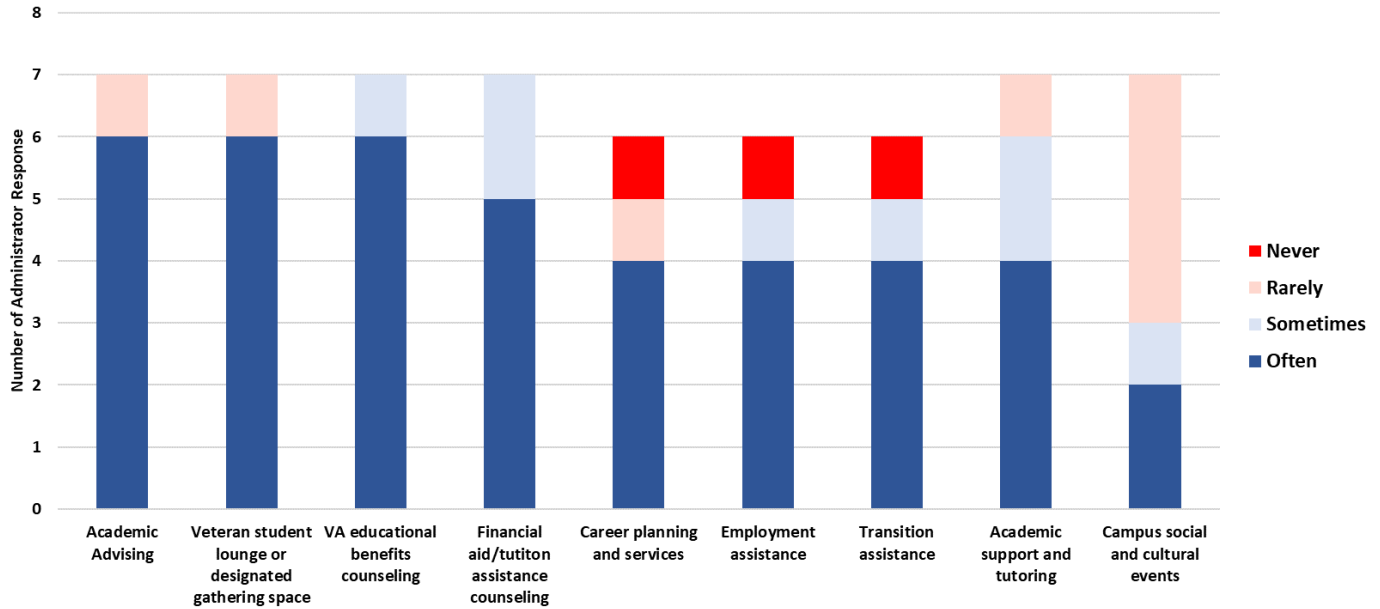


Figure 9. Administrator Perception of Veteran Student Service Use

Eight of ten administrators ranked 11 of their most pressing issues affecting veteran students and/or their dependent’s educational progress at their institution. Table 7 presents their responses with the value of 1 equal to the most pressing and 11 to the least.

Table 7. VETS Administrator view of student needs<sup>1</sup>

| Issue  | High | Low | Mean  | Std Dev | Variance |
|--|------|-----|-------|---------|----------|
| Timely issuance of VA education benefits                     | 1    | 6   | 2.75  | 2.28    | 5.19     |
| Financial issues related to tuition and educational expenses | 1    | 5   | 3.00  | 1.58    | 2.50     |
| Financial issues related to housing and living allowances    | 2    | 6   | 3.63  | 1.49    | 2.23     |
| Clear understanding of VA educational benefits               | 2    | 8   | 4.25  | 1.64    | 2.69     |
| Academic-related stress                                      | 2    | 9   | 5.25  | 2.38    | 5.69     |
| Appropriate housing availability                             | 2    | 8   | 5.75  | 2.05    | 4.19     |
| Health issues related to military service or disability      | 5    | 9   | 7.13  | 1.27    | 1.61     |
| Inclusive and accepting campus climate                       | 1    | 11  | 7.63  | 2.87    | 8.23     |
| Child care or other family issues                            | 2    | 10  | 7.88  | 2.67    | 7.11     |
| Job placement after graduation                               | 3    | 10  | 8.00  | 2.69    | 7.25     |
| Other  | 9    | 11  | 10.75 | 0.66    | 0.44     |

Note: n = 8.

Topics most frequently listed as the top three concerns were all financially related: Issues surrounding tuition and educational expenses, housing and living allowances and issuance of VA educational benefits. An unusual backlog (93,000 or 69% higher than the previous year) of Veterans Administration GI Bill Claims and associated bill payment may have influenced these survey responses. At the same time, the 2018 GI Bill housing

allowance computation resulted in decreases (Absher, 2018). To a lesser degree, administrators felt students were grappling with academic stress and health issues, and inclusive campus climates. The wide variance on these issues may be indicative of the progress of individual campuses.

### ***Physical Center.***

All VETS universities have all transitioned the core of their veteran student support to a single center. These centers led by single individuals or a small group of fully committed and enthusiastic administrators who stretch themselves to attract and serve students. Three centers employ work-study students, typically positioned to greet and direct visitors, “They need to see a veteran face when they walk in”. Location of these centers is nuanced, balancing access, space, and privacy. Half of all respondents indicated that space availability was challenging. Three of five institutions have located VETS centers adjacent to or accessed through game rooms. Administrators and students innovatively adapt, creating “a YouTube video” to locate a center located in the building basement. Others use campus signs, banners, or marquees to direct traffic to more isolated but private space. One center has plans for relocation in a larger, but less central campus location.

### ***Mental Health Care.***

Most centers offer connections to veteran student counseling services (88%). Access comes in the form of coordination and referral to off-campus support services (88%), VA services (75%), and access to a psychiatrist (75%). Three campuses coordinate VA site visits. One campus relies heavily on these site visits, as the campus counseling is not prepared to handle veteran students' mental health needs and is compound by no local VA service. However, the mobile VA does not meet the veteran student need in terms of frequency or quantity. "That's why we have the mobile VA. There is such a need for local veterans. If you have a disability for PTSD on your medical, you are required to go to counseling. And we don't have enough appointments. It's really tough." Another campus has been able to establish daily referrals to the campus counseling center. Most administrators commented that they used a combination of referrals to the clinic and visits to the veteran student center. These center site visits helped students become familiar with the support, and made them “feel more comfortable than it is potentially to go to the counseling office.” Administrators all addressed the need for adequate and flexible hours and location to support veteran student mental health needs.

### ***Financial Counselling.***

Given the array of financial aid programs and their strict programmatic requirements, institutions have developed solutions designed to assist veteran students in accessing the financial benefits. By law, each campus uses a certifying official to review and approve VA paperwork each semester. However, the GI Bill closely ties financial eligibility and academic performance. This relationship requires academic advisors to provide informed support to students concerning decisions regarding major and course selection, poor academic performance, and dropping courses. This blend of knowledge—curricular and financial—allow certifying officials and veteran administrators

to work with academic advisors to support students in their decisions. Most institutions (63%) campuses offer a tuition refund policy. This financial benefit may support the service member's continuing to afford education when service demands require dropping out of a course. However, only one institution offers an expedited re-enrollment process tailored to the needs of these students. While three others offer re-admittance or re-application, three require returning veteran students to complete a standard re-enrollment process. Institutions offer a variety of financial assistance to veteran students and their dependents. One institution responded that they use data to counsel students on historically used scholarships, "I have the capability to look at other students that are receiving these scholarships that are in our area using VA benefits." Four institutions interviewed offer Texts for VETS and or Tech for VETS programs, where used textbooks or computer equipment are available for veteran student use, defraying college cost. Further, one school offers a campus pantry for students with nutritional needs. The websites of all ten institutions provide scholarship information.

### ***Academic Advising.***

Veterans centers focus on the transition of the veteran onto the campus and dedicate the priority of services to students in their first and second year as veteran students learn the campus. Veterans centers, operate, or will operate, as a "one-stop shop" for veterans on campus where they can seek help with financial aid, academic advising, extracurricular activities, and interact with other veteran students on campus. However, institutions still require students to visit other function-specific offices. The breadth of academic advising for veteran students and their GI Bill-using dependents is broader than that of their non-veteran peers given the complexities many students bring to campus. While topics overlap with those of traditional students: course validation, major selection, course load, internships and career preparation, veteran students' experiences require their academic advisors to have more specific knowledge of the requirements levied by federal and state aid. The centers rely on academic advisors to counsel students in their disciplines but understand errors in counseling may have significant financial implications. "But I think there is a gap there. I have sometimes had a frustrated student veteran come in and you know their adviser said well you should really take this it will help you in this next class take this class before you take that one". Administrators warily walk the line between interference with an advisor and implementation of a GI Bill scholarship. "I don't think that's really the proper thing to do. Now if it were to happen a lot yeah. Talk to the other department head...ask them if they were aware that we had the advising guide". All administrators counsel their veteran students to return to the veteran student services center to review semester plans following their counseling with academic advisors. Two centers are located adjacent to campus "One-Stop Shops" who manage enrollment, registration, housing, and finance for all students. VETS administrators on campuses with these offices work to cultivate key advisors to whom they refer veteran students. Many of these centers—MTSU and APSU especially—expanded from their physical center and provide a robust digital presence to help answer questions for veterans. Figure 10 presents responding to student frequency of use of campus programs. The digital presence is a critical element for the advising of students, but students reported using veterans' centers each semester and the accompanying academic advising the centers offer.

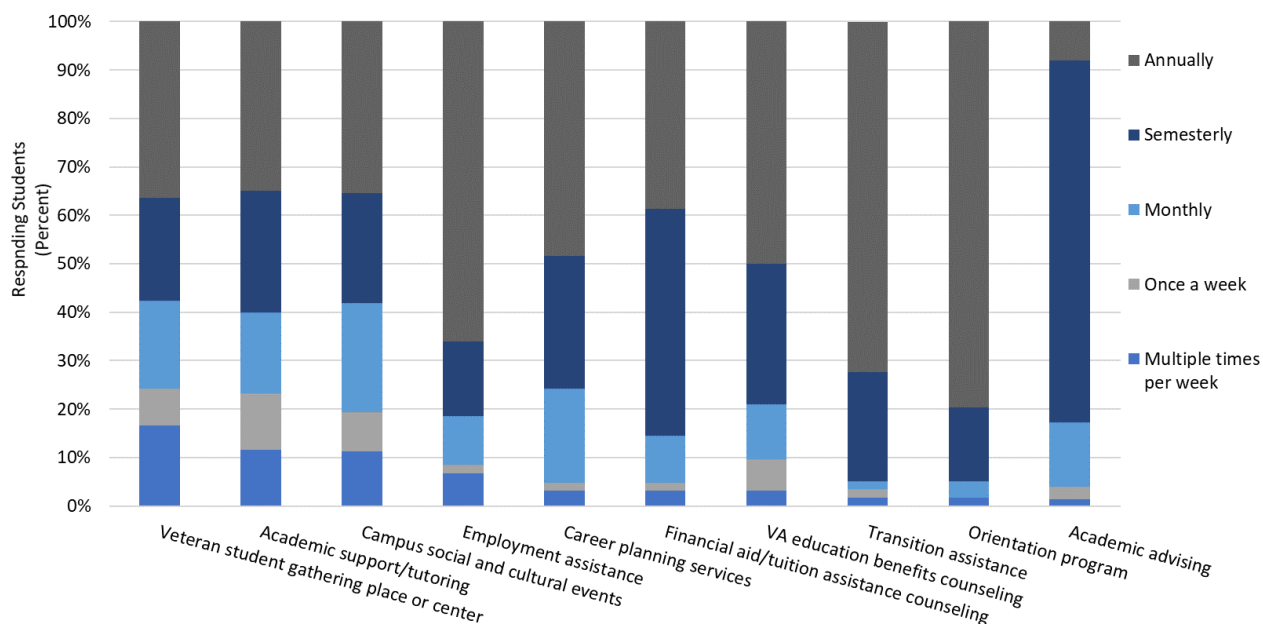


Figure 10. *Veteran Student Program Use*

### **Career Services.**

Institutions largely struggle to incorporate career services into their offerings for their students due to "the amount of time we have to coordinate between campus services really limit our ability to extend more offerings for career services". This sentiment was common across interviews as the administrators understand that veterans attending their universities are "coming so they can get a good job". Job counseling is a future priority or as an opportunity for external funding. One student expressed, *"I want our center to do better at helping me prepare for my next steps"*. Administrators see the utility in orienting strategy around supporting the needs of students, but resource constraints limit them and force difficult trade-offs in the advising support provided veteran students and their dependents.

*"They really do love us, but they don't give any resources"*.

Administrators develop persistence, patience, and partnerships to obtain resources for their centers. Funding is a priority with 88% responding that seeking private, state, and federal funding for campus programs in their five-year initiative priority is a moderate or high priority. They collaborate with peer support services, educating staff of specific needs of veteran students within the sister office.

*"So I think it's really important to collaborate with outside departments so they understand. They may have a general understanding but they really like to make sure that they understand exactly how they play a key part in student success, not just veteran students services."*

Administrators report the importance of leveraging other programs given resource limitations. There seems to be a balance between resource deficits that limit services and those that encourage collaboration. Veteran student advocates seek champions at policy setting levels with financial and or positional authority.

*"It was much needed to have somebody in that position at a table with the President. There's no more going like this to get there. (gesturing a zig-zag line). There's like a straight shot to get to it."*

These partnerships can be critical in the difference between strategic or opportunistic planning of funds. *"I stay focused on the—I always bring up one thing at a time. Just trying to get a bite out of the apple."* Ultimately, veteran administrators relate to their position as front-line soldiers. They feel personally responsible for each veteran student, helping them navigate through the minefield of academia. However, they understand the sheer scope of the operation and the needs of the participants' limits their capacity to fully support their students.

### ***Making Connections on Campus.***

A strong sense of student self-belonging narrates improved retention (Braxton et al., 2014). VETS administrators recognize that creating an inclusive environment for veteran students is a need and have worked to provide tailored supportive programs. One administrator commented that a successful transition requires the veteran student not only to understand their own self but also to understand others. Veteran students make connections with students, faculty, and staff, as well as the off-campus community but not all in the same manner. Variety in veteran student selves and situation challenge administrators who seek to support those connections and diverse student needs.

*"And so, I think it's really important when we talk about veterans' students that we disaggregate that image and that we understand each of them as an individual and has individual needs in which we need to try to have programs and services available that will help them achieve their goals."*

Some students seek the comfort of other veterans, and others seek to immerse themselves into the new norm of the campus because *"they feel that they've served already and they're taking a break"*.

Similarly, administrators work to help the campus community understand veterans through Green Zone training, student panels, public interest stories in the media and mentoring programs. This is a challenging and time-consuming task, as not only do administrators need to understand their veteran and non-veteran students, but they must also know which elements make their campus unique. UTK VETS staff build on the school's athletic spirit to include veterans. APSU, with its higher veteran student representation, allocates less time to educating staff about veterans and more time on supporting students in understanding the campus. Administrators additionally reach beyond campus gates to involve the community. Several administrators run career fairs and invite potential employers to the campus. One administrator is using data to track the success rate of post-graduate employment. All administrators report some level of

career transition support, with mixed results. These efforts serve to support veteran students as they transition from military to campus environment by making connections. *“We want to know that the students are saying we’re military friendly and military friendly can mean so many things to so many different people.”*

Veteran administrators provide crucial leadership for institutional collaboration and professional development to support veteran students. Additionally, these administrators manage physical centers, staff, and budgets and make critical decisions that affect the quality of support for students.

### **RQ 3: What resources do veteran students utilize to navigate their transition in, through, and out of Tennessee public universities?**

We drew data from the student survey, observational protocol and the administrator interview protocol the administrator survey to inform the results of this research question. Quantitative analysis methods of t-test and Chi-squared on student survey data-informed transition elements of self, situation, and strategy. Qualitative analysis methods on the student survey, observational and administrator interview informed all four transition elements. We organized this section to answer research question 3 sub-questions, by transition elements.

#### **RQ 3.1: How do veteran students report developing relationships to support successful strategies in transitioning in, through, and out of Tennessee public universities?**

##### ***Self.***

Veteran personal and demographic characteristics, as well as psychological resources, influence his or her ability to cope with a transition. The responding veteran students differ in many ways from the traditional college student. Student responses that described themselves and their practices in response to survey questions are presented in Table 8. We used paired T-tests to compare the veteran and dependent student mean responses. The results of the T-test suggest that there is a difference in transfer behavior between veteran students and dependent students. Many (63%) veteran students transferred from another higher education institution, however, only 14% of dependent students transferred. This indicates that institutions are not just helping students transition from the military to campus life, but are also supporting students who have some experience within higher education prior to coming to a Tennessee university. This experience adds an additional layer to the complexities a veteran student brings to campus. Most students (92%) chose to attend full time, with no evidence of differentiation between veteran and dependent students. Results in Table 8 also indicate the statistically significant relationship between veteran status and their acting as sole providers of their households. None of the 21 dependent students were the sole providers while nearly half (45%) of the veteran students managed school and family commitments.

However, demands outside the classroom differ significantly. A chi-square test of independence was performed to examine the relationship between marital and veteran status. The results in Table 9 indicate that the observed differences between marital status and veteran status and that the variables were significant. While only 24% of dependents are married, even more (67%) veteran students reported marriage or domestic partnerships. Veteran students juggle the demands of full-time studies as well as managing households and long-term relationships during their academic transitions.

Table 8. *T-test comparisons between veteran student and dependent student behavior.*

|  | Veteran Students<br>Mean<br>(%) | Dependent Students<br>Mean<br>(%) | Difference of Means<br>(%) | T-test |
|--|---------------------------------|-----------------------------------|----------------------------|--------|
| Student Transfer                         | 62.96                           | 14.29                             | 48.67***                   | -4.153 |
| Sole Provider                            | 45.45                           | 0.00                              | 45.45***                   | -4.128 |
| Student GI Bill Use                      | 76.36                           | 47.61                             | 28.75                      | -2.475 |
| Full Time Enrollment                     | 90.74                           | 95.24                             | -4.50                      | 0.194  |
| Veteran Specific Admissions Program      | 70.90                           | 47.62                             | 23.28*                     | -2.364 |
| Faculty and Staff Relationship Awareness | 16.36                           | 4.76                              | 11.60                      | -1.336 |
| Faculty and Staff Relationship Desired   | 56.60                           | 60.00                             | -3.40                      | 0.258  |
| Loan Use                                 | 25.45                           | 52.38                             | -26.93*                    | 2.281  |
| State Aid Use                            | 29.10                           | 71.43                             | -42.33***                  | 4.102  |
| Institutional Aid Use                    | 24.10                           | 71.43                             | -47.33***                  | 3.591  |
| n  | 55                              | 0.00                              |                            |        |

\* significant at  $p < 0.05$ , \*\* significant at  $p < 0.005$ , \*\*\* significant at  $p < 0.0005$

Table 9. *Student Marital Status by Veteran Status*

| Marital Status           | Veteran Status   |                   |
|--------------------------|------------------|-------------------|
|                          | Veteran Students | Dependent Student |
| Divorced                 | 4                | 0                 |
| Married/Domestic Partner | 37               | 5                 |
| Single                   | 13               | 16                |
| Widowed                  | 1                | 0                 |

Note:  $\chi^2(3) = 18.1, p = 0.000$

### **Situation.**

Understanding the community around them as welcoming is a key social goal that veterans' administrators seek to provide for their students. Issues relating to the basic identification of veteran students on campus makes this goal more difficult. A high portion of veteran and dependent students (87%) felt their faculty were not aware of



their veteran status. Importantly, more than half (58%) of both veteran students and dependent students desired their faculty have a higher awareness of their contributions as veterans or dependents. As seen on Table 8, the t-test analysis of difference revealed no evidence suggesting veteran and dependent students' assessments and desires differed toward faculty interaction.

Incorporating these students into campus life is difficult. One student contended, "This campus tailors to 18-year-old students and is biased against transfer students and only cares about accreditation. This is not a veteran-friendly place". Another student stated that their campus needed to "spread the word better about what the veterans center can help us with". Another stated a desire for a formal mentorship program to help them understand their new role as a student. Students and administrators alike raised the issue of understanding their value to the institution. While students indicated a desire for additional veterans' events on campus, campus administrators expressed exasperation in the inability to get veteran students to attend the current events they host.

Campuses do conduct ceremonies, student groups, and celebrations of veteran students occurred on almost every campus interviewed. When asked which services or programs are available to veterans, only 12% of those surveyed were aware of student groups for veterans. Veteran administrators find ensuring all veteran students are aware of services, events, and opportunities are critical to their success and the relevancy of the veterans' centers. Despite the low reported rate of awareness, 42% of respondent students indicated using the veterans center and attending a campus social event at least once every month as seen in Figure 11. Interestingly, students reported low levels of transition assistance service and academic advising.

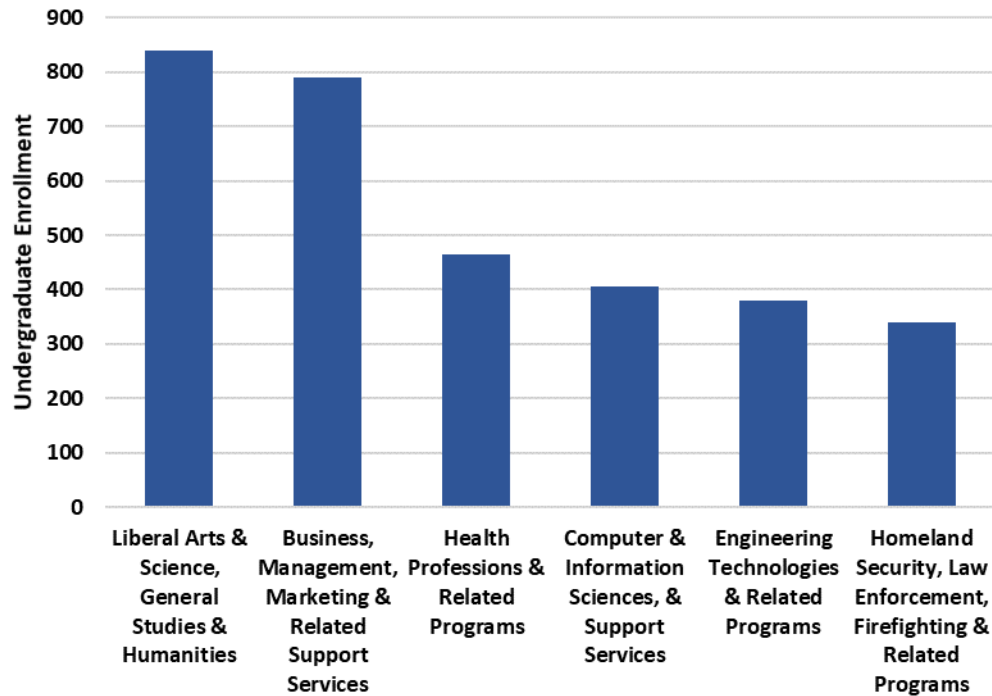


Figure 11. *Undergraduate Enrollment of Veteran Students by Academic Program*  
Data Source; THEC, 2018.

### **Strategies.**

Veteran students implement coping responses to modify, control or aid in managing their transitions. A large majority (76%) of veteran students report using the GI Bill to fund their education. Despite this majority, students struggle to be identified as a veteran. A chi-square test of independence was performed to examine the relationship between the frequency at which an institution inquires of a student’s veteran status and the student’s veteran status. The results in Table 10 indicate that the observed differences between these variables were significant. Table 10, also shows that institutions are missing a significant opportunity in that 24% (18 of 76) of all responding students reported never receiving an inquiry of their veteran status. Using the GI Bill to capture these students would require additional self-identification of approximately a quarter of the remaining veteran students. This seems to suggest that veteran students who, perhaps are in the greatest need for information on earned educational benefits, are not known to the institution.

Table 10. *Institutional Veteran Status Inquiry by Veteran Status*

| Inquiry Frequency | Veteran Status   |                   |
|-------------------|------------------|-------------------|
|                   | Veteran Students | Dependent Student |
| Annually          | 6                | 8                 |
| Never             | 13               | 5                 |
| Course by course  | 1                | 1                 |
| Semesterly        | 35               | 7                 |

Note:  $\chi^2(3) = 9.1, p = 0.028$

Veteran students attend universities primarily to attain the private good conferred to them through a baccalaureate degree. In comments, veteran students expressed a desire to have much more opportunities to work with career services and have mentorship opportunities in the community. Veteran administrators expressed an understanding that most of their veteran students enroll at their universities to only obtain the credential needed—the private good—for the desired job. Interestingly though, according to VETS data from 2018, veteran students enroll in a variety of disciplines at universities, but concentrate mainly in the humanities, social sciences, and business—not necessarily disciplines like emergency medicine or information security that are commonly linked to their military occupational specialty (see Figure 10). This leads to interesting questions regarding the viability of prior learning initiatives, legislation, and state policy regarding how to best serve the students on university campuses. At one campus, the president directing the deans of each college via email to advance PLA analysis and adoption “as a preeminent priority at our University”.

Interviewees at both campuses and at THEC reported a desire to shift strategy towards more retention and completion models, but the still-developing infrastructure on most of the campuses limits the ability for the campus to adjust their strategy. Administrators report some veteran student aspirations out-pace their abilities. Others find veteran students well-advised when working as a team with mental health providers and academic advisors. Figure 11 shows degrees awarded in 2017 by the percentage of degree type. Baccalaureate degrees logically make up the lion’s share of degrees awarded across these four-year colleges, but graduate and professional degree pursuit seem to be a fruitful place for investing in veterans. LGIs especially lag their peers in the UT system in awarding advanced degrees to veteran students and their dependents.

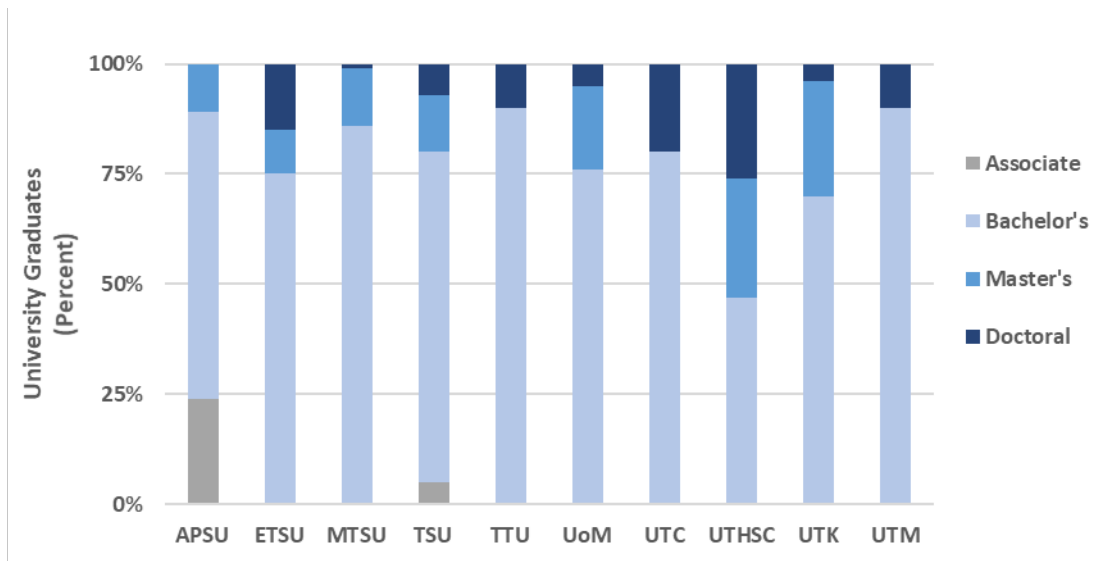


Figure 12. *Tennessee Four-year Public University Graduates by Degree – 2017*  
 Data Source: THEC, 2018.

**RQ 3.2: How often do veteran students access the resources and supports available to them at federal, state and campus levels?**

Financial concerns comprised the most pressing issues affecting all students (48%). The next most significant concern was academic related stress (23%), followed by post-graduation job placement (13%) and child care or other family issues (13%) (Figure 12). While each campus offers similar services, some of the campuses appear to provide more information to aid in the students in their transition to, though, and out of Tennessee public universities. All the websites seek to provide social and educational programs, guidance, and information to help veteran students and their dependents in and out of the classroom.

***Financial Support***

In totality, financial issues made up one-third of veteran student perceived pressing issues. With the addition of understanding VA educational benefits (dominated by finance), these concerns increase to nearly half of their most pressing issues (48%). Students desire additional support surrounding financial issues. While 76% of veteran students report using the GI Bill, when compared to dependent students, they are less likely to secure additional loans (25%), obtain state aid (29%) or institutional aid (24%) to attend their institutions. Each of these differences was found to be statistically significant as presented in Table 8.

The admissions process provides an opportunity to inform veteran students of their earned educational benefits. Table 11 presents the results of a T-test between admissions counseling and GI Bill use. Most students report receiving counseling, independent of their GI Bill use, from a designated admissions office staff member on the use of earned educational benefits. Despite the differences in counseling means (71% for GI Bill use and 50% for those who did not use GI Bill), there is no evidence to suggest

that the student's choice to use the GI Bill influences the presence of this counseling. This seems to suggest that there is a lost opportunity to fund degrees through available federal, state, or institutional earned educational benefits. Further, the act of counseling students on their earned educational benefits would support veteran student self-identification.

Table 11. *T-test Comparison of Admissions Counselling and GI Bill Use*

|                                | <b>GI Bill Use<br/>Mean<br/>(%)</b> | <b>No GI Bill Use<br/>Mean<br/>(%)</b> | <b>Difference of<br/>Means<br/>(%)</b> | <b>T-test</b> |
|--------------------------------|-------------------------------------|--|--|---------------|
| Received Admissions Counseling | 71.15                               | 50                                     | 21.15                                  | -1.81         |

\*significant at  $p < 0.05$ , \*\* significant at  $p < 0.005$ , \*\*\* significant at  $p < 0.0005$

Further, students request additional support guiding them through their next financial concern of job placement. Communication may be a concern as students indicated they desired more information about veteran student center activities. Some students suggested mandatory workshops. This wish is consistent with VETS administrators who lamented that not every student attended orientation, especially veteran-specific orientation.

### ***Career Support***

Each institution's website provides information about financial support, VA benefits, military tuition assistance, and general services available as students transition into and through the university, but not all the websites outline how they support veteran students and their dependents as they move out of the university. UTM provides valuable information about programs, services, and funding opportunities available to veteran students, it does not provide any information about future employment. Information about VA Work Study opportunities most resembles employment information, but students use work study when they are attending the institution. Based on the UTM Veteran Services website, the university does not specifically help veteran students and their dependents' transition out of college. The site provides some helpful links to veteran job search tips, information about reentering the civilian workforce, and military skills translator, but there are no on-campus resources. Like UTM, UTC Veteran Student Services website does not identify any specific employment guidance or support. While there is information about VA Work Study, the website does not display any post-college employment resources.

While not providing the full scope of services to help veteran students and their dependents enter the workforce after graduation, UTK Veteran Student Services website provides information about veteran-friendly employers both at the local and national level. The website identifies a career counselor who works specifically with veterans.

APSU and MTSU are two of 94 postsecondary institutions nationally (both 2-year and 4-year institutions) that support VetSuccess On Campus (VSOC) programs. VSOC

aims to coordinate the delivery of on-campus benefits assistance and counseling to support college persistence and labor market readiness and job placement. As VSOC programs, APSU and MTSU successfully maximize student success in the transition to, through, and out of college. In Spring 2019, UTK Veterans Student Services is hosting events with employers for veterans to learn about internship and job opportunities. As the state of Tennessee presents new policies directed towards veterans, institutions react and adapt to the new opportunities for their students. Universities in Tennessee vary in the implementation of these policies.

### ***Academic Support.***

Despite ranking academic-related stress as their greatest concern, over half (53%) were not aware of counseling services available on campus. Further, students requested more support and information about VA services. As one student commented, he/she hoped for support to "work to connect vet students with mentors." Respondents seem to value support through personal connections as 21% of respondents identified on-campus advisors as the most effective communication method, second only to email.

### ***Family Support.***

With 55% reporting as married or in a domestic relationship and nearly half reporting as heads of households, respondents expressed their interest in family support programs. Figure 12 presents the percentage of students who report these as the most pressing issues affecting their educational progress. Financial issues related to housing and living allowances were the third highest, behind academic related stress (23%) and tuition-related expenses (19%). One student suggested the support of a Family Readiness Groups (FRG) which provide coordinated support to service members and their families (CNO, 2018) or a spouses group. One institution has pursued and earned designation as a Military Spouse Career Advancement Accounts (MyCAA) school which provides financial assistance for military spouses in earning licenses, certification, or Associate's degrees in designated fields. A small minority of students found that child care or other family issues were most pressing (9%) or appropriate housing availability

(2%). Dependent students request support as well, “I feel unwelcome in most programs on campus because I didn’t want to join even though I’m a dependent”.

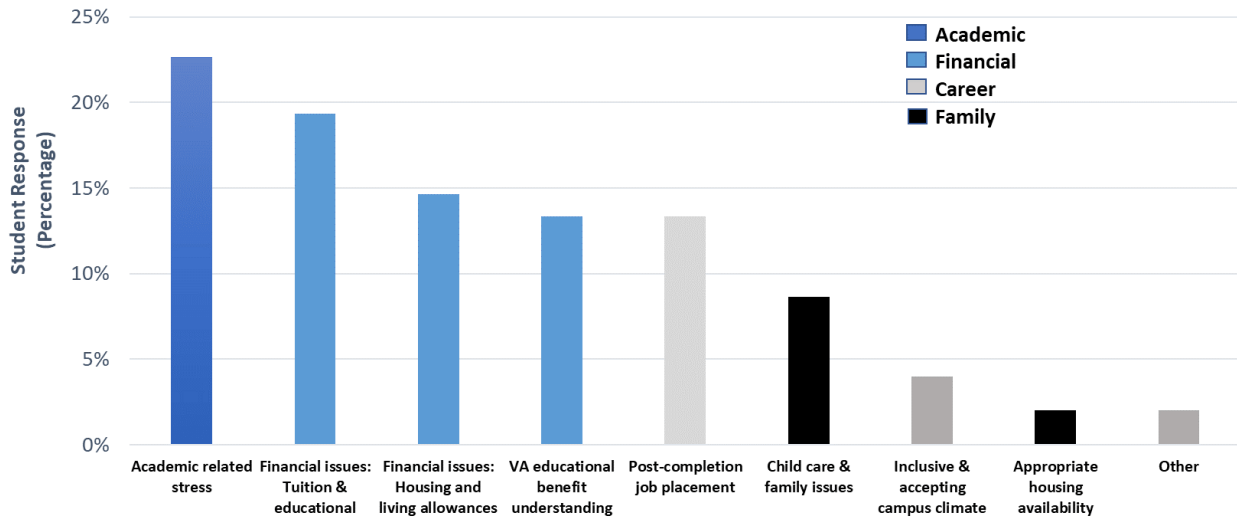


Figure 13. *Student Perceived Issues Affecting Their Educational Progress*

Figure 13 shows importance of issues related to returning to school. Interestingly, respondents gave other issues seen as major inhibitors of non-student success—transportation, housing, food insecurity—lower rates of importance. By understanding what veteran students find important, administrators can better help student situate into

campus

life.

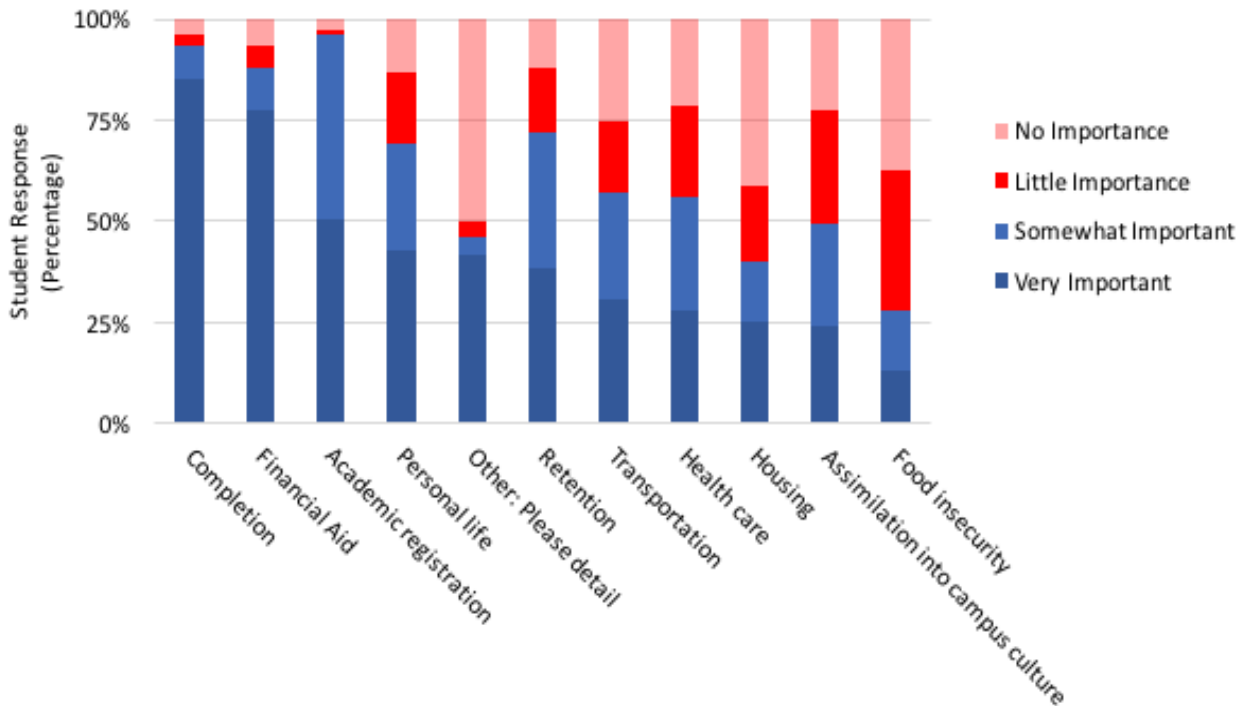


Figure 14. Student Perception of Issue Importance

## Discussion

Tennessee is active in both state policies and institutional programs regarding veteran student access and initial transition to campus. However, there is less than adequate coverage of the retention, completion, and transition out of the university and into the next stage of life for these students. Currently, the components of a more balanced environment for veteran student success exists, but the state, in partnership with institutions, must provide additional supports and paths forward for universities to align their policies and programs. Evidence from this study suggests Braxton's persistence framework holds validity with veteran students and their dependents. These students are engaged in a continuous process of reciprocity engagement with the institution throughout their experience on university campuses. This engagement is well supported early in the student life-cycle, but as the student matriculates towards the end of their collegiate career, there is less support for the issues upperclassmen students find pressing—graduation and career placement. The following discussion will extrapolate institutional policy development, identification, and tracking efforts surround veteran student and dependent engagement. Next, we examine physical centers, advising, and communication with students. Lastly, we discuss how dependents factor into policy and institutional program development and the transition of students out of the university. Critical to all these efforts is the development of strategies for veterans as institutional policy.



## **Institutional Policy Development**

*“The president wanted somebody at her table that can speak for the military.”*

- Campus Director

Veterans Reconnect grants have been effective policy tools to increase institutional focus on serving veteran students and their dependents. Further, Tennessee’s Outcomes Based Funding model allows some institutions to gain additional funding for designated student populations—of which veteran students are an option. These state policy levers have helped shape institutional actions and allow THEC the ability to transmit best practices to campuses and provide some funding to help implement the changes or additions.

Ultimately, the success of veterans programming is determined by the priority these students get from the highest levels of institutional leadership. At a few campuses, serving veterans is a presidential directive highlighted with high ranking retired military officers in key leadership positions, mass publicity of veterans’ services, internal directives from presidents and chancellors themselves, and ultimately funding.

## **Veteran Student Identification**

*“Just different tricks to get that information to come out”*

- Campus Veterans Director

Universally, campuses reported a lack of confidence in their ability to provide an accurate figure for the total enrollment of veteran students on their campus. This is due to a variety of reasons, significantly, the lack of a unified state definition of veteran students understood by both institutions and the students alike. This lack of clarity results in institutionally created definitions often limited in scope and function. Some institutions only count the number of GI Bill recipients on campus. Others create definitions that restrict the definition to only veterans who have served in the main branches of service and ignores those in the Coast Guard or the National Guard. Further, institutions may overlook veteran dependents—even though these students comprise a significant amount of the population using GI Benefits.

Identification matters significantly. As research question 3 found, veterans are more likely to use the federal benefits with which campus administrators are familiar. However, half of the dependents slip through normative identification measures. Further, only 65% of students’ surveys report receiving financial counseling from the institution. These measures suggest that there may be a significant population of students who are not receiving all their entitled financial support. The TDVS only tracks veterans using benefits on campuses and only communicates for certain programs the students identified. State law allows veteran students priority registration which is a benefit unknown to many veterans that would help ensure veterans get access to required classwork.

Multiple campus directors highlighted priority registration as a primary incentive for self-identification, but one director was not sure if this was in state statute or not, but still told students about this benefit because their institution engaged in this operation. Properly identifying veterans is critical to supporting state policy beneficiaries, but as well to exclude unauthorized recipients. One such example is international students who served in their native countries' military service. While valued by the administrators, their inclusion skewed reporting and brought confusion to the staff and students.

To accurately identify, users need a universal definition of a veteran student. Accordingly, Tennessee and the institutions face this challenge. On the one hand, the definition can easily be too restrictive in scope and omit large proportions of the intended target population. On the other hand, the definition can be so broad that students who did indeed serve active combat may share little to no commonalities with others included in the definition. Depending on the definition, veteran students may be reluctant to admit to their status if they did not serve in combat. Without all veteran students, researchers and policymakers lose the ability to fully generalize and group these students. Since the definition of veteran students is flawed, the ability to report accurate enrollment and graduation numbers is inherently incomplete. After developing a useable definition of veteran student, the next phase is to implement the definition with more holistic identification methods that leverage advances in technologies available to campuses.

In our interviews, some of the campuses focused on creating better identification methods during the initial admissions and enrollment processes that would better capture veterans entering the university. One way is a multi-step questionnaire included on the school's application that leverages branching to accurately identify the student. Acting as a funnel, the first question offers a broad statement regarding military-affiliation of the applicant with a help window that provides even more detailed descriptions of their definition of military-affiliations. If a student answers yes, the subsequent questions drill down into the type of military service, length, and desire to relate to veteran services to financial aid and veterans' benefits advising. The Common Application, which restricts institution-specific questions, limits this initiative. Nonetheless, focusing identification on initial information intake for students is promising as VETS reporting indicates. Through such a process, the institutions seek multiple safety nets to catch veteran students during this phase. Further, such a process allows the institution to cross-reference the enrollment record with the benefits used to ensure the veteran student or veteran dependent is using available benefits if they desire. Only identifying those with the GI Bill limits accurate reporting to those veteran students not using their GI Bill for their undergraduate education.

Currently, the VETS reporting asks institutions to rely on a combination of traditional reporting (e.g., GI Bill use) and self-identification that results in many different identification codes for military-affiliated students in the state information system. While additional streams for gaining information is necessary, the reliance on the self-identification of veteran students is problematic. As one campus director stated, "Unless there's a reason for them to identify, such as wanting access to some program or benefit like a scholarship that requires disclosure, then there's not a 100% response for getting

veterans to self-report”. Some veterans wish anonymity, preferring not to raise questions regarding their exit from the military, and others may wish to pass on their benefits to their dependents. One campus administrator highlighted multiple students whom they understood to be veterans but was not using their benefit because of plans to attend graduate or professional school after their undergraduate education. Accordingly, establishing more robust identification measures during the admissions and registration process and decreasing the reliance on self-reporting once enrolled will decrease the variance in veterans reporting on campuses. One piloted initiative is ensuring that orientation activities through the institution have opportunities to capture veteran students. This initiative will have a military service question on the general orientation portal to try to expand awareness of veteran-specific orientation sessions. Further, campuses often provide less orientation support to transfer students than they do for traditional students. Unlike civilian students, veteran students may have earned their transfer credits much earlier in their military careers. Though many veterans are technically transfer students, they may not have had recent college experience and need the orientation support offered to non-transfer students. Just as some campuses offer veteran student breakout sessions in non-transfer orientations, campuses should consider this offering in transfer student orientation. In doing so, the institution may both increase veteran student identification and support.

## **Data and Tracking**

*“There’s one by the attribute code that the school assigns to them based on what they declare on their application, and then there’s the one that I can pull based on the education V.A education benefits that they’re using.”- Campus Veterans Director*

Once defining and identifying veteran students enjoys more accuracy, universities can begin to leverage advances in information systems to track, engage, and analyze their veteran students. One institution developed a data system with TDVS to allow for real-time monitoring of veterans that synchronize academic, financial, and student affairs data around each veteran student in their system. This system enables the veterans center to drill down to student-level data in real-time and provides the veteran administrators and advisors the capacity to develop warning systems that alert them to any problem the student is encountering. For example, students must enroll in a certain amount of credit hours per stipulations in the GI Bill, but an advisor unfamiliar with the GI Bill or their veteran student status may press a student to drop the course. This could have a severe effect on the student that requires a complex repayment process to the VA. Given the importance of even just a thousand dollars to the prospects of retention, a situation such as this can have an incredibly detrimental effect not just on retention, but in student engagement, trust, and fidelity to the university (Dynarski, 2002). As Georgia State has demonstrated, effective data use has monumental effects on increasing completion rates (Smith, 2019). Accordingly, such a system may have a profound effect on boosting completion rates amongst veteran students and their dependents—once properly defined and identified.

Increasing the use of data systems allows the institution to engage in data driven program evaluation of offerings. With advances in information systems, wearable

devices, Bluetooth beacons, and swipe card technologies, institutions have the capacity to know much more about the programs and services utilized by their students. In addition to uses in academic and financial advising, applying data-driven program evaluation to veteran students—as multiple institutions are initiating—allows veterans centers to better allocate resources and design programs that have meaning for their students. By implementing better services, programs, and policies, institutions will create a better environment for their veteran students to feel welcome and successful.

## **Retention**

*"...you cannot measure a military veteran graduation rate the same we measure first time, full-time cohort graduation rates. Because with that you have a body of people who are starting at the same time and you can measure their progress over a number of years. With the military, and the veterans, they are coming in at all different points along the way, and they may not finish at that four-year/six-year. They may go and come back and finish in eight years, so that is a huge challenge. And if someone is able to develop a mechanism that would include all those factors and accounts for whether using a clearinghouse or whatever but account for students who go on to graduate somewhere else. It would be more; I think the numbers would have greater integrity." - Campus Administrator*

Every campus administrator commented on the importance of retention as the next project they wish to tackle. One institution seeks to infuse Tinto's retention theory into the framework for their offerings. Tinto informs how the staff sees their role with students. However, access and transition still preoccupy much of their attention, leaving limited resources available to devote to upperclassmen veteran students outside of ceremonial events commemorating graduation. MTSU hopes their data system can help restore greater balance and help them engage in greater retention efforts.

At THEC, the Veterans Reconnect team is beginning to conceptualize the next phase of the program. To date, the four grant cycles focus on access, transition, and infrastructure building to support these ends. As the program matures and seeks additional funding from the legislature, an awareness of the need to focus on the retention of veterans is apparent. Further, the VETS and Veterans Reconnect program are both working to better understand how to work with the current data and how to get better data to inform the next round of their offerings. Increasing retention and completion is important for both programs, but THEC staff are aware that until they improve the identification of veteran students, accurate reporting will remain impossible.

## **Physical Centers**

*"We'll continue to do those things, but we're really focused on the academics but also, we want this to be a space where they can come in and just de-stress and get away from the chaos of campus or maybe something that might have triggered their PTSD or something and they can out here"- Campus Director*

Establishing veterans' centers on campuses has been an emerging strategy at Tennessee universities since the advent of the VETS programs. The institutional priority ranges from capital development campaigns and celebrity donations to years of advocacy for any available space where a center could become established. Veteran students use these spaces on a regular basis and for many, these centers become an oasis on campus. One administrator contended, "This is the only place they feel comfortable at. And they keep coming and coming and coming and coming". These centers balance the need for a designated space for veterans with the need to integrate veterans into the campus at large. This reality manifests in the physical locations of centers ranging from single buildings, to embedded offices in student centers, to libraries. How to handle the need for balancing inclusion versus segmentation is an area for future research.

Designed as one-stop-shops, veterans centers share similarities. Centers will feature a lounge, computers for students, administrative offices, and study areas. All either have a check-in process to track veterans either manually or through a swipe card. While all share similar bones, the quality of the spaces has significant variance. One campus is in the process of renovating a car dealership showroom to become the new veterans center. Another veterans center occupies large sections of two floors of the student union, while another was gifted space by a librarian to establish a center. This administrator stated:

*But finally last year we were pushed enough to get our space and the space in this in this area was umm, used to be a map room. And so, the Dean of the Library gave us the space under the condition that it would be a veterans center. He's an, he's a veteran himself. And so he was very interested in getting a space on campus too. I wish we had a bigger space. We advocated for this space for so long. Have all these things going on and we have all these ideas and I'm thinking gosh if we only have the space for, I wish we had a bigger space.*

The quality and visibility of these spaces matter, but their utility by students is clearly apparent, with over 40% of respondents to the student survey saying they visit the center at least every month. Accordingly, campus directors attempt to limit the amount of time a student has to traverse campus for any university action related to their veteran's status. Said one administrator about finally having a physical location, "Before veterans came here, they had to go to like three different buildings just to get, maybe four, just to get all their stuff handled. It's still not perfect, there's a long way to go. But when they come to my office, I'll make sure that it was handled out of here. I am hoping to get eventually everything in one building."

Administrators are now in the process of adapting centers to the needs of the students. At one campus, the director engages with students on a regular interval to ensure the center is adequately meeting needs. At another university, a formal task force is currently studying how to best design their center to better serve students. These efforts remain limited. One administrator stated, "I wish we had a bigger space. We advocated for this space for so long. Have all these things going on and we have all these

*ideas and I'm thinking gosh if we only have the space for I wish we had a bigger space".* A center-focused program is not without its constraints. One administrator voiced exasperation that they are always running around campus to other offices. Another voiced dissatisfaction with the quality of advising occurring at the department level and attributed this to the campus misunderstanding that the veterans' center provides all the support for veterans. Diffusing these responsibilities, while maintaining leadership, is critical for these centers.

## **Distributed Advising**

*"But right now, I do the running. I go to the four buildings and make sure that everything is taken care of so that when they get here, everything is taken care of. So that when they leave, everything is done."*- Campus Director

A trade-off of consolidated centers and advising locations for veterans' services is the absence of a greater network across campus that feels equipped with enough knowledge and professional development to support veteran students outside of the veterans' center. When institutional leadership does not appropriately apply professional development and expectation setting, consolidation can lead to the absolution of responsibility. As a result, campus directors and their staffs play many roles—academic and financial advisors, community engagement agents, committee members, etc.—that stretch resources and capacities thin. As a result, campus directors expressed a “jack of all trades” mentality. While their efforts are commendable, veteran students and their dependents expressed a desire for broader access. Institutions need to clarify and orient strategy around their veterans' centers and administrators. Access, transition, retention, and completion all require similar, but different, skill sets and programs. Too often Tennessee's university leadership implicitly require the centers to be all things to their students without the appropriate breadth and depth of supportive resources.

One way to bring this clarity is to study how APSU decides to allocate resources. While not every campus is next to a major military base and can boast multiple generals on their leadership team, every campus can look to APSU for help in delivering strategies to support their veteran student populations. Like MTSU, APSU understands, and relies on, veteran students and their dependents to enroll and find success on their campus. Over 25% of APSU has a military-affiliation and serving these students well is critical to success. APSU is in the beginning stages of renovating recently acquired commercial property to become a veterans and dependents center on their campus. They provide ample professional development to their faculty and staff and established an off-campus site at Fort Campbell to serve currently serving soldiers. Like MTSU, they engage in student recruitment of active duty soldiers, before their separation or retirement from the service. These campuses push to be these veteran students' first choice. APSU even establishes degree programs—e.g., nascent helicopter program—to provide a direct degree pathway for the soldiers at Fort Campbell to acquire necessary credentials for gainful civilian employment. APSU is attempting to use its cadre of military officers in leadership positions to inform institutional practices. Institutions in Tennessee should learn from their experiences and adapt tangible components to their campuses.

Stove-piped university bureaucratic system do not easily govern veterans' centers which exist in a quasi-space. This is due to the multiple functions of veterans' centers. These offices and their staffs are the primary sources of contact for the financial relationship between student, institution, and federal and state veterans' administrations. They also serve as the first contact point for academic and social advising for veteran students and their dependents. They collaborate with peer institutional offices, organize and host events with outreach operations, and leverage state and national non-profit supporting organizations. Stated simply, veterans' centers exist within and beyond traditional campus governance structures. This dual existence makes situating veteran centers problematic as other support offices such as academic affairs, bursars, and student services provide critical and required student support. Our study found that the skills and backgrounds of those in leadership capacities at the centers guide the focus of the veterans' center and offerings. At one campus, the director does not have personal experience in the military but has earned a doctorate in higher education, published works on retention, and possesses strong, close family ties to the military. This lends the administrator a certain degree of credibility. At another campus, the main administrator is a former military officer with a Ph.D. as well as a history of administrative positions. The director at another campus is the certifying agent for the VA with expert skills in navigating federal bureaucracies. Thus, administrator expertise influences the services and programs these campuses provide. Linking these directors together should become a clear priority at both the institutional and state level so they can share their expertise and provide a higher quality of service to their students.

## **Professional Development**

*"It's our responsibility to inform them what are the differences with veterans"* - Campus Veterans Director

Consolidating veterans' services into a campus center helps to ease confusion by veteran students and their dependents on where to go and who can answer questions. However, this consolidation carries the unintended effect of also alleviating the need for broad campus support and knowledge of how to best support veteran students. Campus directors do not discount the students expressed a desire for faculty and staff to obtain more enhanced skills through professional development. Proactive campuses in Tennessee are countering this withdrawal by promoting professional development across the campus and leverages existing relationships with various institutional offices to expand the reach of training across campus. One administrator stated that they provided professional development to 88 faculty and staff the prior year to help equip more professionals on the campus with some working knowledge of how to best engage with veterans.

This pursuit to provide professional development involves increasing the organizational capacity of the institution—a quite different responsibility than aiding students in their access, transition, and completion goals. Multiple institutions have joined the Green Zone initiative. Originally developed at Virginia Commonwealth University, this homegrown professional development helps a campus provide broad campus awareness of the issues and needs of veteran students and equips faculty and staff with basic

response training. Green Zone is adaptable to campuses and multiple campuses in Tennessee have adopted large elements of the training. Administrators reported the contributions Green Zone made up for in lack of military experience. One administrator stated, *“There are lots of things I just don’t know, but now I’ve been taught”*.

As changes to VA benefits occur, campus administrators become entangled in implementing changes, communicating to students and necessary campus offices, and updating policies and training to comply with the training. In this vein, most campuses reported weekly communications with the VA regarding clarifications and support. One campus invites VA representatives for standing weekly training and student support sessions. Campus directors work closely with THEC and TDVS and, as changes occur, update, and make available professional development. Professional development ranges from emails and flyers to multi-day training. Some campuses leverage relationships with the American Council on Education (ACE) to provide help with working with prior learning assessments.

Professional development involving the new ways information systems are augmenting traditional advising was a constant item that campus directors needed more help in fully exploiting to help students. On one campus, fluency with the system is allowing the campus to see gains in retention and graduation rates. At others, access to data involves going through other offices on campus that creates a disincentive for the directors to use data to drive decision making. Through multiple interviews, the directors see difficulties getting advisors from outside their centers to use the data available or even have the capacity to use the data and the information system. Linking directors together to help develop efficacious professional development on Tennessee universities is a key area of focus that can help improve system-wide improvements in the quality of service provided to veteran students in Tennessee.

## **Student-Centered Communication**

*“Well the ones that come by the office, we get them to sign up for remind, or text message alerts. That seems to work better. The other ones, all I have to do is to send emails and flyers. We put it in the campus newsletter. But emails and remind works better than anything.”- Campus Director*

Engaging students with types of communications students respond with is a constant priority for campus administrators. The volume of campus constituencies and federal and state agencies that need communication streams with students creates a problem for campus administrators. Administrators need to promulgate and ensure receipt of important communications by the students, while also marketing campus events and programs of lesser import. Said one administrator, *“They [veteran students] couldn’t register because of not getting their money from the VA, almost all of these holds can be mitigated with communicating with our students”*. Another stated, *“But if I send them email on a weekly basis or all the time, they are going to get tired of me. So I choose very wisely what I send from my account”*.



Students, for their part, prefer targeted emails and receiving word from their campus advisors. Figure 14 shows how veteran students and dependents preferred communications from their students. The largest proportion identified targeted email and messages from their campus advisors as the most important communications methods. Campus administrators are trying to be proactive as well. One campus is attempting to ensure that students receive text messages of important deadlines, while another is making sure veterans-specific content has an area on their campus intranet, and yet another has placed retired military officers in various leadership capacities in various divisions to ensure that any communication or program they offer is well-crafted for veteran students. Student-centricity in campus communications is something veterans and administrators both responded as something that made student for at home on their campus.

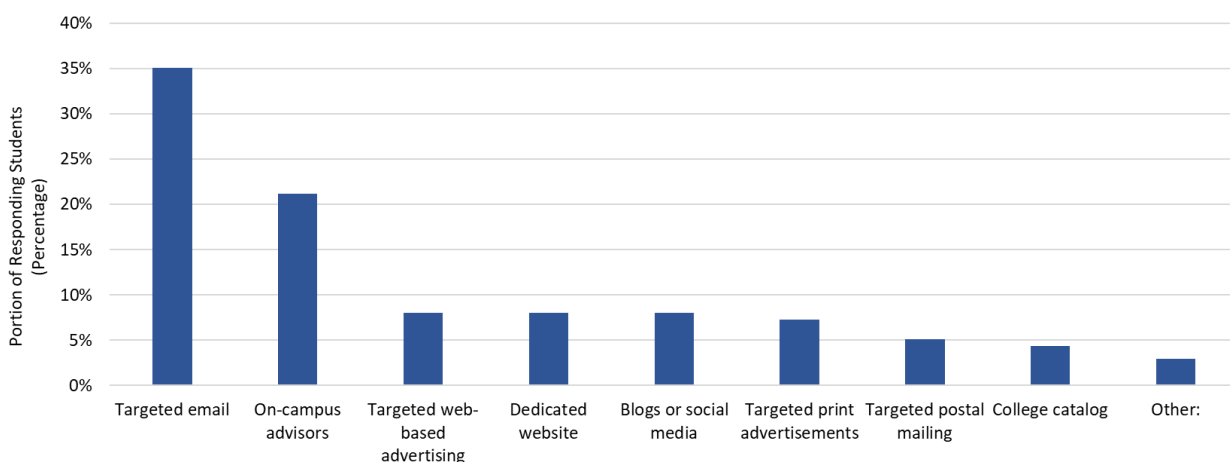


Figure 15. *Veteran Student Preferred Communications*

### Supporting Veterans Through Their Dependents

*“And one of the things that we witnessed several years ago is that sometimes the military family is having issues. It may not be the students and we could not serve the student. So, there’s one nonprofit in town that specifically grew up to serve not just military members or veterans but also the family members.”-*

Campus Administrator

*“I wish we knew about more resources like a military family support group”-* Student Response

The total number of dependents on some campuses in Tennessee is surprising. In combination with the nearly 28% of survey respondents who listed themselves as a dependent, this population certainly is due inquiry. Many of these students feel strong connections to the military through their home environments. Even those dependents not using GI Bill benefits can benefit from some of the services offered at institutions. By

showing inclusivity for these students, universities can better improve their retention and completion rates and create a broader environment for the success of any military-affiliated student. Some campuses welcome dependents with as much outreach as veteran students, but on others, they exist in a quasi-space between veterans and the general student body. On one campus, they made a strategic decision to include families in their official title.

Another campus recognized that supporting the veteran's family is critical to the success of the student. Connecting the student and their family to community supports is a goal of the center. Said one administrator, *"We have found that dependents use our services at higher rates than we expect"*. Another director commented, *"Dependents are coming out of my ears"*. Clearly, the serving of veterans means ensuring they or their family is aware of resources either on campus or in the community. Challenges remain. As difficult it is to identify veteran students, it is likely to be even more difficult to identify dependent students with only half reporting using the GI Bill. Almost 67% of the veteran student responses to the survey indicated they were married, and 45% as the sole provider for their households. Even without asking about children, veterans students have a high number of dependents that through the services provided to the veteran student or the dependent is necessary for their success.

To that end, veterans' centers vary the extent to which they designed services to include dependents. In most of the interviews, administrators stated their desire for dependents to feel welcome but also understood their primary responsibility to be for their veteran students. Sometimes the dependent students make the decision easy for the veteran center—they just show up. Said one administrator, *"She (the dependent) comes here every day and says her dad served. She said this is where she feels most at home"*. Serving dependents well—either as a student or as the family of the student—is a critical driver for the success of dependents. Ensuring these parties have their needs met helps the student know they can focus on their education and do the immediate job at hand without worrying about externalities.

Veteran centers also feel the demands of supporting the veteran student with their non-student dependents. With half the students reporting financial concerns as their most pressing, the additional burden of finding and funding quality child care, and in some cases spousal employment, is reflected in the 13% of the respondent veteran students. The trend that veteran students are far less likely to pursue loans or additional state or institutional aid combined with all students' financial concerns indicate a potential opportunity for additional programs and veteran student self-identification. Institutions should consider improving financial aid literacy through collaboration with the veterans' centers.

As centers think strategically about student supports, situating the role of dependents is a critical decision that may have a profound effect on success. As the state develops policy and legislation, addressing supports for dependents may be a wise policy target as they represent large numbers on campuses.

## Career Transition Services

*“And then at the end of the academic road they make that transition into the workplace and that’s another transition. But when you’re looking for a job, and you’ve only got 10 people you know, then that’s narrowing down job opportunities.”- Campus Administrator*

*"I ask for a veteran's rep to help them transition their military language to civilian language to help with their resume. They think they don't have any transferable skills. They say, 'I was just in the infantry.'" - Campus Administrator*

Obtaining private benefits of higher education motivates veterans to attend universities. Accordingly, both administrators and students commented on the need for better career services support for veterans. Students express desires for both official programming within the university and also in a desire for increased mentorship and networking opportunities. Both students and administrators express apprehension around the student’s next step. Said one administrator, *“After here they transition into the civilian world—which is one of the most difficult transitions a veteran will ever have”*. Creating and leveraging community support is crucial to support students in this transition. One campus hired a staff member just to meet the local demand for veterans by employers. Another created a position for a veteran whose job will be to run all things career-oriented for their veteran students.

While providing any assistance in finding future employment, hands-on, in-person support is critical to veteran student and veteran dependent future success. On administrator acknowledged that veteran students need assistance translating their skills and experiences from *“military language to civilian language to help with resumes”*. Veteran students have an opportunity to display their *“transferable skills that are very valuable in the civilian world.”* While all websites examined provided some information on the variety of career and job placement resources available, two universities did not identify on-campus, veteran student or veteran dependent, guidance for students. APSU and MTSU provide holistic support that helps students move in, through, and out of the institution. The VSOC programs at APSU and MTSU provide veteran students with in-person assistance in writing résumés, searching for jobs, preparing for interviews, and exploring best-fit career choices. The websites for both institutions highlight these essential resources for veteran students.

Currently, there is no state policy connected with higher education to support dependents specifically. VETS-only report data and Veterans Reconnect has had a few projects funded where dependents were a target sub-population of the overall proposal. Currently, there is legislation proposed to offer in-state tuition to veteran dependents (Tennessee General Assembly HB0205, SB0347). Other than these policies, veteran dependents are using the excess benefits of state and institutional policies, but are not the direct beneficiaries of any specific suite of programs.

## Conclusions

### Framework Analysis

Currently, the state and institutions align their policy and actions, respectively, closer to access than completion as shown in Figure 15. This alignment places a strain on institutional efforts to increase retention and ultimately completion. The closeness of state policy to access manifests a variety of funding sources, programs, and services to help veteran students access and transition into the university. Deficiencies in identifying and tracking students on campus make more difficult helping veteran students transition through the university. Institutions and THEC agree they must work to foster increased retention and, ultimately, completion, but few campuses currently possess the resources to operate programs for these goals. State policy efforts fall short to support Drive to 55 veteran student completion goals. Accordingly, future state policies should look to increase the institutional capacities to foster retention and completion of students. In doing so, the framework will return to an equilibrium where state policy more equitably addresses access and completion. While there is great momentum at the state level and some institutions towards the development of policies and programs supporting veteran student success, there is a noticeable lack of resources available to devote to their ongoing retention, completion, and transition out of university into a good job. This final transition may be the most critical for the career trajectory of veteran students and represents an inflection point where policy and programming must support to provide balance to the policies around veteran students.

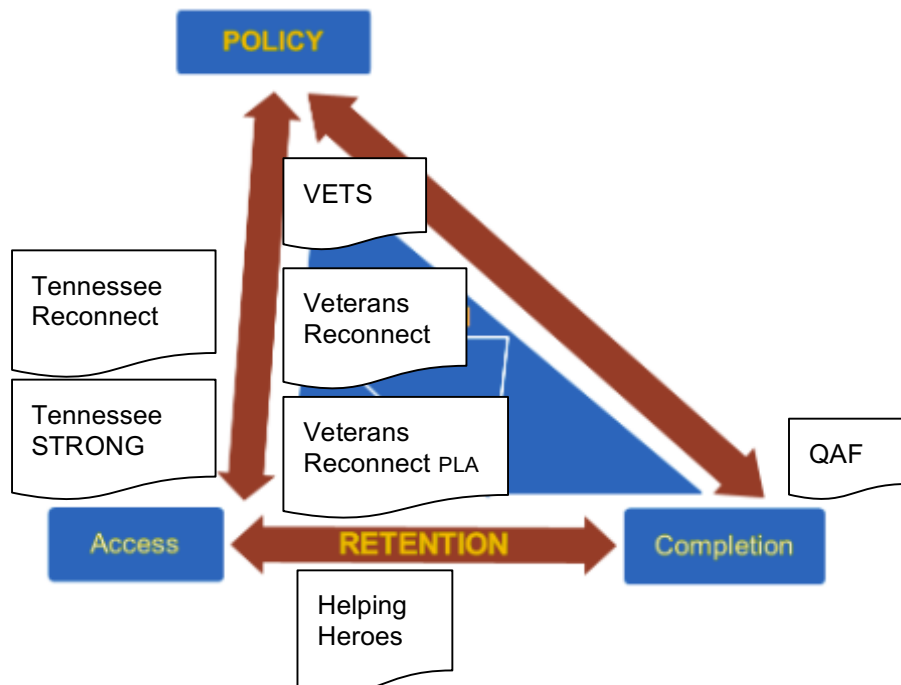


Figure 16. *Current Transition Policy Framework*

Notes. Authors' interpretation

This capstone also sought to provide a launchpad for future research by TN-PEARL and THEC regarding veteran students. To that end, future researchers should orient their studies around better understanding the educational life cycles of veterans, especially in regards to the origins of educational credit, understanding why these students transfer from one institution to another, and time to degree. The effectiveness of educational programs and advising the military provides prior to discharge is a ripe area for research. Researchers should investigate the effectiveness of programming and financial counseling provided by institutions and the impact of these activities on retention and completion. Further, evaluating the implementation of data systems at various campuses to support veterans will be critical to understanding where gaps exist in the utilization of these tools and how to provide appropriate supports to those leveraging these tools for student success. Lastly, researchers and state policymakers should understand if veterans are underutilizing available federal and state aid for their education and seek to understand how to better communicate to veteran students the aid entitled to them for their service.

Finally, TN-PEARL commissioned this project to provide recommendations for policy and practice. To this end, this project provides five recommendations each for state policy and institutional practice. These recommendations seek to respect the limitations of funding and institutional capacity and to be achievable with few additional resources. Accordingly, these recommendations seek to organize the existing infrastructures available in the state and at institutions to promote an environment better tailored to veteran student success.

## **Recommendations**

### **Policy and Practice**

#### **1. Create a state definition for veteran students and for a successful transition**

THEC needs to establish an ad-hoc committee comprised of staff and institutional leaders to facilitate a process to create a common definition for veteran students and an appropriate metric representing a successful transition. These two definitions are necessary to get actionable information from accurate data. Currently, the lack of a common definition of veteran students leads to a wide variance between campuses and highlights the relative importance campuses of veteran students on campus. A lack of common understandings of a successful transition limits the capacity of state and institutional policymakers to send clear messages to veterans about what policies and programs exist to do. This process is necessary for THEC to undertake due to the wide variety of stakeholders around veterans' education and will require decisions that will either limit or expand access to veterans' services for many students. Accordingly, the leadership of THEC in navigating this political terrain.

A first step would be for THEC to convene relevant administrators from the UT system, TBR, and institutional directors with the charge to establish a baseline definition

for veteran students. This convocation could address issues around the broadness of the definition selected and be cognizant about which groups would be omitted from the definition. Importantly, this group would develop the role that dependent students would have in reporting and on campus. Lastly, this group would need to determine a transition success metric that is reportable and representative of state goals around both post-secondary and veterans' success. This conversation will need to address retention, graduation, and career placement rates and determine which or how to report these factors to the state.

## **2. Increase the precision of identifying veterans**

THEC will then convene the primary institutional research officers at each institution to determine how to identify veterans and dependents more accurately. This accuracy is important to decrease the variance of current reporting on veterans and better provide policymakers and institutional leaders with accurate estimations on cost, effects, and impacts of their work with veterans. Decreasing the variance of identifying and reporting of veteran students is a critical step towards the development of effective practices at institutions in Tennessee. Accurate VETS reporting and policy development in Tennessee requires following a common methodology for identification and unambiguous measures of success.

## **3. Develop state policy and programs for veteran student completion of post-baccalaureate programs**

As campus centers and services mature, the capacity to offer additional support for the next transition for veterans should become a major priority and receive consideration for targeted state grants. Veterans Reconnect has operated four rounds of funding of projects designed to address access and transition of veteran students onto their campuses. Future iterations of the grant should focus on retention, completion, and in the transition into the workforce. Veteran students requested access to mentorships and career transition services. We must celebrate the finish line crossing following degree completion. Public ceremonies such as those now held by MTSU and APSU provide that recognition of graduated veterans.

The current PLA initiative coordinated by THEC should review the academic data at universities and adjust for serving veterans who are not enrolling in disciplines connected to their service histories. Many veterans at universities are gaining requisite credentials for their future graduate or professional studies. Stated simply, PLA initiatives need to better account for the soft-skills a veteran learns during service and understand that there may not be a one-to-one comparison with a veteran's experience in the military and in their preparation for a professional degree like engineering or law. Seeking ways to award PLA for credit in a way that serves students not following their military occupation is critical to ensuring that all veteran students access this benefit and have an equal opportunity to have shortened pathways towards their baccalaureate degrees.

#### **4. Work to establish statewide mentorship opportunities for veteran students with ECD and TDVS**

Work by a single agency in addressing the career transition for veteran students is insufficient compared to the capacity of multiple agencies working in collaboration towards a shared goal. There are a variety of state programs, nonprofit initiatives, and community organizations designed to help veterans readjust to civilian life and find good occupations. With a degree in hand, thousands of veteran students are entering the labor market without needed partners to help guide the way. Working together, THEC, TDVS, and ECD can bring a statewide network and marketing initiative to universities contribute to the awareness of all veteran graduates of job and mentorship opportunities, professional training, and other supports available. In this way, the state provides a constellation of support for veteran students and their dependents. Through partnering with veteran centers on university campuses, the state is likely to increase veteran student engagement of resources through improved information.

#### **5. Establish Policies for Veteran Dependents**

In 2017, veteran dependents accounted for 34% of the population reported in VETS for university campuses. This significant population exists in a space between veterans and the general student body and may find needed support from campuses veterans services - even if not explicitly invited. Just as the nation recognizes a dependent's contribution to their service members' commitment, so should the state. Tennessee is home to thousands of veteran dependents who may have access to GI Bill benefits, but who may lack awareness of their eligibility. Further, there are thousands of veteran dependents currently on Tennessee's university campuses. Serving these students through some formal policy would expressly welcome these students to a university campus and help the Drive to 55. Further, policies to help veteran students find success may increase social capital. The interaction of veteran students, carrying little college knowledge, through formal veterans programming could facilitate relationships with those students whose backgrounds bring a greater understanding of the college campus.

### **Institutional Practice**

#### **1. Leverage data management and analytics systems**

Some institutions are in the early stages of leveraging data to better serve their veteran students. In one implementation, a partnership with TDVS developed a data system, while another through contracted through a commercial agreement. Every university in Tennessee should implement some data implementation. Once employed, universities can better engage in data-driven decision making and decrease the variance of services between institutions. Such systems may also allow for better tracking of veteran students and dependents transfer between schools. Through establishing a common standard for information systems, universities will decrease the variance in their ability to identify their veteran students and dependents. In turn, this may allow for appropriate, real-time advising. By providing timely advice to students before or during a

potentially academic career-jeopardizing event, an institution may increase retention and completion.

## **2. Distributed advising and Green Zone adoption**

The responsibility for veteran students belongs to the whole campus, not just veterans' directors. By distributing veterans and their dependents advising and providing more professional development, veterans centers, and their primary staffs can provide better support around retention, completion, and career transition. Through adopting campus Green Zone training, universities will ensure that there are many more trained resources to help large military-affiliated student populations on university campuses.

Veterans directors currently shoulder a heavy load. Given their proximity to this student population and their fluency in navigating the issues facing military-affiliated students in a post-secondary environment, directors wear many hats for many audiences. These responsibilities have created a consolidated position is responsible for all-things-veterans, while absolving other campus faculty and staff of having a duty to know at least a minimal amount about veterans to help any veteran whom they may advise. As a result, these key personnel are undertaking many orientation and initial transition responsibilities. While necessary to a degree, the needs of students already enrolled and matriculating through need additional support as their needs change and they begin to prepare for life after graduation. Accordingly, universities need to work to train all faculty and staff toward a baseline knowledge of engaging with veteran students, an understanding of what resources and staff are available for them, and how to make sure the student information system has a student's veteran or dependent status correctly identified.

## **3. Hire positions focused on graduation, external partnerships, and first jobs for veteran graduates**

The last stage of a college student's education is always stressful. This is truer for veterans encountering yet another major transition point in their lives. Universities can decrease the stress by better serving these students entering this final transition out of formal education. Given the complexities of access and initial transition—coupled with advising executive administrators on a campus— campus directors lack the bandwidth to work as effectively with external opportunities, resources, and employers to connect students to their next steps. Accordingly, hiring an individual to manage external relationships and focus on graduation targets for veteran students may be a critical institutional strategy to get students over the finish line. Further, this position can serve as the external face for veterans on campus and work to establish relationships with the many nonprofits in Tennessee dedicated to serving veterans. Also, this position can help connect employers seeking veterans to the annual pool of graduates at a school. In this way, veterans' centers and their staffs will increase the social capital available to veteran students and be responsive to their expressed needs.



#### **4. Include veteran dependents in official programming**

Veteran dependents occupy a unique space within a campus population and share many similarities with veteran students. On some campuses, they comprise almost half of the military-affiliated population and the lion share of GI bill uses. These students have had their lives shaped by the military in some way or another. Accordingly, they should be an included services population of veterans' centers and their staffs. These students have the potential to form unique bonds with veteran students on campus and increase the social capital of all the students served by a veteran's center. In crafting policy and developing programs, veterans' centers' administrators should listen to the voice of the veteran dependent. Institutions must make a key priority, providing the dependents of veterans this service.

#### **5. Ensure veterans student advocacy at the institutional policymaking level**

Engaging veteran students to establish their rapport encourages their voice and increases their engagement with the institution. Veteran students previously demonstrated experience in massive bureaucracies, and have a heightened awareness to gaps in service and the breaking of protocols. Accordingly, through inclusion in the design process of programs, services, and policies, veteran students can better understand higher education institutions. In turn, the institution benefits from its critical eye, resulting in a more effective product.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A: Survey and Interview Protocol Crosswalk

*Survey and Interview Protocol Crosswalk*

| Instrument<br>(Note 1) | Dependent Variables |           |         |          | Key: | RQ1<br>State Policy<br>(P) | RQ2<br>Institution<br>Effort<br>(I) | RQ3<br>Student<br>Navigation<br>(S) |
|------------------------|---------------------|-----------|---------|----------|------|----------------------------|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
|                        | Self                | Situation | Support | Strategy |      |                            |                                     |                                     |
| AS1                    |                     | P         |         |          |      |                            |                                     |                                     |
| AS2                    | I                   |           |         |          |      |                            |                                     |                                     |
| AS3                    | I                   |           |         |          |      |                            |                                     |                                     |
| AS4                    | I                   |           |         |          |      |                            |                                     |                                     |
| AS5                    | I                   |           |         |          |      |                            |                                     |                                     |
| AS6                    |                     | P         |         |          |      |                            |                                     |                                     |
| AS7                    |                     | P         |         |          |      |                            |                                     |                                     |
| AS8                    |                     | P         |         |          |      |                            |                                     |                                     |
| AS9                    |                     | I         |         |          |      |                            |                                     |                                     |
| AS10                   |                     | I         |         |          |      |                            |                                     |                                     |
| AS11                   |                     |           | I       |          |      |                            |                                     |                                     |
| AS12                   |                     |           | I       |          |      |                            |                                     |                                     |
| AS13                   |                     |           | I       |          |      |                            |                                     |                                     |
| AS14                   |                     | I         |         |          |      |                            |                                     |                                     |
| AS15                   |                     |           | I       |          |      |                            |                                     |                                     |
| AS16                   |                     |           | I       |          |      |                            |                                     |                                     |
| AS17                   |                     |           | I       |          |      |                            |                                     |                                     |
| AS18                   |                     |           | P       |          |      |                            |                                     |                                     |
| AS19                   |                     |           | I       |          |      |                            |                                     |                                     |
| AS20                   |                     |           | I       |          |      |                            |                                     |                                     |
| AS21                   |                     |           | I       |          |      |                            |                                     |                                     |
| AS22                   |                     |           | I       |          |      |                            |                                     |                                     |
| AS23                   |                     |           |         | I        |      |                            |                                     |                                     |
| AS24                   |                     |           |         |          | I    |                            |                                     |                                     |
| AS25                   |                     |           |         |          | I    |                            |                                     |                                     |
| AS26                   |                     |           |         |          | I    |                            |                                     |                                     |
| AS27                   |                     |           |         |          | I    |                            |                                     |                                     |
| AS28                   |                     |           |         |          | I    |                            |                                     |                                     |
| AS29                   |                     |           |         |          | I    |                            |                                     |                                     |
| SS1                    | S                   |           |         |          |      |                            |                                     |                                     |
| SS2                    | S                   |           |         |          |      |                            |                                     |                                     |
| SS3                    |                     |           |         |          |      | I                          |                                     |                                     |
| SS4                    |                     |           |         |          |      | S                          |                                     |                                     |
| SS5                    |                     |           |         |          |      | S                          |                                     |                                     |
| SS6                    |                     |           |         |          |      |                            |                                     |                                     |
| SS7                    | I                   |           |         |          |      |                            |                                     |                                     |
| SS8                    |                     | S         |         |          |      |                            |                                     |                                     |
| SS9                    |                     | S         |         |          |      |                            |                                     |                                     |
| SS10                   |                     |           | I       |          |      |                            |                                     |                                     |
| SS11                   |                     |           |         |          |      | S                          |                                     |                                     |
| SS12                   | S                   |           |         |          |      |                            |                                     |                                     |
| SS13                   | S                   |           |         |          |      |                            |                                     |                                     |
| SS14                   |                     |           |         |          |      | S                          |                                     |                                     |
| SS15                   |                     | I         |         |          |      |                            |                                     |                                     |
| SS16                   |                     | I         |         |          |      |                            |                                     |                                     |
| SS17                   |                     |           | I       |          |      |                            |                                     |                                     |
| SS18                   |                     |           | I       |          |      |                            |                                     |                                     |
| SS19                   |                     |           |         |          |      | S                          |                                     |                                     |
| SS20                   |                     |           |         |          |      | S                          |                                     |                                     |

Note: I. AS = Administrator Survey, SS = Student Survey, AI = Administrator Qualitative Interview



|                                       | Instrument | Dependent Variables |           |         |          | Key: | RQ1<br>State Policy<br>(P) | RQ2<br>Institution<br>Effort<br>(I) | RQ3<br>Student<br>Navigation<br>(S) |
|---------------------------------------|------------|---------------------|-----------|---------|----------|------|----------------------------|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
|                                       |            | Self                | Situation | Support | Strategy |      |                            |                                     |                                     |
| Student Survey Questions (SS)         | SS21       |                     |           | I       |          |      |                            |                                     |                                     |
|                                       | SS22       |                     |           |         | S        |      |                            |                                     |                                     |
|                                       | SS23       |                     |           | S       |          |      |                            |                                     |                                     |
|                                       | SS24       |                     |           | S       |          |      |                            |                                     |                                     |
|                                       | SS25       |                     |           | S       |          |      |                            |                                     |                                     |
|                                       | SS26       |                     |           | I       |          |      |                            |                                     |                                     |
|                                       | SS27       |                     | I         |         |          |      |                            |                                     |                                     |
|                                       | SS28       |                     |           | I       |          |      |                            |                                     |                                     |
|                                       | SS29       |                     |           | I       |          |      |                            |                                     |                                     |
|                                       | SS30       |                     |           | I       |          |      |                            |                                     |                                     |
|                                       | SS31       |                     |           |         | S        |      |                            |                                     |                                     |
|                                       | SS32       |                     |           |         | S        |      |                            |                                     |                                     |
|                                       | SS33       |                     |           |         | S        |      |                            |                                     |                                     |
|                                       | SS34       |                     |           |         | S        |      |                            |                                     |                                     |
| Administrator Interview Protocol (AI) | AI1        |                     |           |         | S        |      |                            |                                     |                                     |
|                                       | AI2        |                     | S         |         |          |      |                            |                                     |                                     |
|                                       | AI3        |                     | S         |         |          |      |                            |                                     |                                     |
|                                       | AI4        | I                   |           |         |          |      |                            |                                     |                                     |
|                                       | AI4a       | I                   |           |         |          |      |                            |                                     |                                     |
|                                       | AI5        |                     | S         |         |          |      |                            |                                     |                                     |
|                                       | AI6        |                     |           |         | S        |      |                            |                                     |                                     |
|                                       | AI7        |                     |           |         | S        |      |                            |                                     |                                     |
|                                       | AI9        |                     |           |         | I        |      |                            |                                     |                                     |
|                                       | AI9a       |                     |           |         | S        |      |                            |                                     |                                     |
|                                       | AI9b       | S                   |           |         |          |      |                            |                                     |                                     |
|                                       | AI10       |                     |           | S       |          |      |                            |                                     |                                     |
|                                       | AI11       |                     |           | S       |          |      |                            |                                     |                                     |
|                                       | AI12       |                     |           | S       |          |      |                            |                                     |                                     |
|                                       | AI13       |                     |           |         | S        |      |                            |                                     |                                     |
|                                       | AI14       |                     |           |         | S        |      |                            |                                     |                                     |
|                                       | AI15       |                     |           |         | S        |      |                            |                                     |                                     |
|                                       | AI16       | I                   |           |         |          |      |                            |                                     |                                     |
|                                       | AI17       | I                   |           |         |          |      |                            |                                     |                                     |
|                                       | AI18       |                     |           | P       |          |      |                            |                                     |                                     |
|                                       | AI19       |                     |           | I       |          |      |                            |                                     |                                     |
| AI20                                  |            |                     | I         |         |          |      |                            |                                     |                                     |
| AI21                                  |            |                     | I         |         |          |      |                            |                                     |                                     |
| AI22                                  |            |                     | I         |         |          |      |                            |                                     |                                     |
| AI23                                  |            |                     | P         |         |          |      |                            |                                     |                                     |
| AI24                                  |            | P                   |           |         |          |      |                            |                                     |                                     |
| AI25                                  |            | P                   |           |         |          |      |                            |                                     |                                     |
| AI26                                  |            |                     |           | S       |          |      |                            |                                     |                                     |
| AI27                                  |            |                     | I         |         |          |      |                            |                                     |                                     |
| AI28                                  |            | S                   |           |         |          |      |                            |                                     |                                     |
| AI29                                  |            | I                   |           |         |          |      |                            |                                     |                                     |
| AI30                                  |            |                     | I         |         |          |      |                            |                                     |                                     |
| AI31                                  |            |                     | I         |         |          |      |                            |                                     |                                     |

Note: 1. AS = Administrator Survey, SS = Student Survey, AI = Administrator Qualitative Interview

## Appendix B: Codebook Veteran Student Survey<sup>1</sup>

Q1 Select which category represents you the best?

1 = I am a veteran student

2 = I am a veteran dependent

Q2 Did you transfer to your current institution from a different institution of higher education? 1 = Yes

2 = No

Q3 Are you using your GI Bill educational benefits to attend this institution? 1 = Yes

2 = No

Q4 Are you taking out additional loans to attend this institution?

1 = Yes

2 = No

Q5 Did you receive additional institutional scholarships to attend this institution?

1 = Yes

2 = No

Q6 Did you receive additional state financial aid to attend this institution?

1 = Yes

2 = No

Q7 How often does your institution inquire about your veteran or dependent status?

1 = Annually

2 = Semesterly

3 = On a course by course basis

4 = Never

Q8 Without any action from you, do your professors show awareness of your veteran student or veteran dependent status?

1 = Yes

2 = No

Q9 Do you want faculty and professional staff to know about your veteran or dependent status without you?

1 = Yes

2 = No

Q10 Does your funding for school require your enrollment in a specified number of credit hours?

1 = Yes

2 = No

Q11 Are you enrolled full time? A student is considered full time if he or she is enrolled in 12 or more credit.

1 = Yes

2 = No

Q12 Are you the sole-provider for others in your immediate household?

1 = Yes

2 = No

Q13 What is your marital status?

1 = Single, never married

2 = Married or domestic partnership

3 = Widowed

4 = Divorced

5 = Separated

Q14 Describe your employment status.

1 = Full-time

2 = Part-time

3 = Full-time student

Q15 Do you feel that programs for veteran students are part of your institution's long-term strategic plan?

1 = Yes

2 = No

Q16 Does your institution provide professional development for staff members that focus on the needs of veteran students and dependents?

1 = Yes

2 = No

Q17 Did you work with a designated admissions staff member or team at your institution who coordinated your use of your earned educational benefits?

1 = Yes

2 = No

Q18 Did your admissions process offer programs and services specifically designed for service members and veterans?

1 = Yes

2 = No

Q19 What issues related to returning to school were most important to you? Select all that apply and indicate the level of importance to you.

1 = Very Important, 1

2 = Somewhat Important, 2

3 = Little Importance, 3  
4 = No Importance, 4

Q19\_1 Financial Aid  
Q19\_2 Retention  
Q19\_3 Completion  
Q19\_4 Academic registration  
Q19\_5 Health care  
Q19\_6 Assimilation into campus culture  
Q19\_7 Housing  
Q19\_8 Food insecurity  
Q19\_9 Personal life  
Q19\_10 Transportation  
Q19\_11 Other: Please detail

Q20 Select all institutional programs or services you use and indicate your frequency of use.

1 = Multiple times per week  
2 = Once a week  
3 = Monthly  
4 = Semesterly  
5 = Annually

Q20\_1 Academic advising  
Q20\_2 Academic support/tutoring  
Q20\_3 Campus social and cultural events  
Q20\_4 Career planning services  
Q20\_5 Employment assistance  
Q20\_6 Financial aid/tuition assistance counseling  
Q20\_7 Transition assistance  
Q20\_8 VA education benefits counseling  
Q20\_9 Veteran student gathering place or center  
Q20\_10 Veteran student gathering place or center

Q21 For what types of prior learning did your institution award college credit? Select all that apply.

1 = College coursework at another institution  
2 = Evaluated awards for military occupational training  
3 = Evaluated credit hours for military training  
4 = Evaluated credit for corporate training programs  
5 = Examinations or test-out procedures  
6 = National testing programs  
7 = Portfolio review or assessment  
8 = Other

Q22 Which curriculum delivery formats do you utilize in your academic career? Select all that apply.

- 1 = Online education
- 2 = Hybrid courses
- 3 = Evening/night courses
- 4 = Weekend courses
- 5 = Accelerated courses
- 6 = Micro-courses
- 7 = Other

Q23 Does your institution have any of the following designed to serve veteran students and/or their dependents? Select all that apply.

- 1 = Staff specifically trained to assist with these students
- 2 = A licensed counselor or psychologist trained to work with these students' needs
- 3 = Support groups
- 4 = Mentoring opportunities
- 5 = Support groups for these students with disabilities
- 6 = Support groups for the families of these students
- 7 = Support groups for dependents of deceased veterans
- 8 = Counselor or specialist with training for traumatic brain injuries
- 9 = Student-led organizations
- 10 = ROTC
- 11 = Veterans Upward Bound
- 12 = Support groups for women veterans
- 13 = Civilian life skills management training
- 14 = Other

Q24 Does your campus provide counseling to assist veteran students and/or their dependents with the following issues? Select all that apply.

- 1 = PTSD
- 2 = TBI
- 3 = Depression
- 4 = Social adjustment
- 5 = Stress/anxiety management
- 6 = Sexual trauma
- 7 = Do not know
- 8 = Other

Q25 Does your counseling center offer the following to veteran students and/or their dependents? Select all that apply.

- 1 = Access to psychiatrist
- 2 = Coordination and referral to off-campus support services
- 3 = Coordination and referral to support services provided by the US Department of Veteran Affairs

4 = Site visits by or co-location of US Department of Veteran Affairs personnel on campus

5 = Do not know

6 = Other

Q26 Does your institution have an office or department exclusively dedicated to serving veteran students and/or their dependents?

1 = Yes

2 = No

Q27 Which of the following descriptions most accurately describes your campus' structure for offering veteran students and/or their dependents?

1 = Veteran student center

2 = Administrative office

3 = Program within student services

4 = Bundled services from a variety of campus entities

Q28 Does your institution have an established policy regarding tuition refunds for military activations and deployments?

1 = Yes

2 = No

3 = Do not know

4 = No-handled case-by-case

Q29 What re-enrollment process must military students complete to enroll in classes following deployment?

1 = They must reapply

2 = They are automatically readmitted

3 = Complete standard re-enrollment process common for all students

4 = Complete expedited process to accommodate military students

5 = Do not know

Q30 Which of the following sources of financial assistance does your institution offer veteran students and/or their dependents? Select all that apply.

1 = Discounted tuition for veteran students

2 = Discounted tuition for active military

3 = Discounted tuition for dependents/spouses

4 = Eligibility for in-state tuition

5 = Scholarships for veteran students

6 = Scholarships for active military students

7 = Scholarships for dependents/spouses

8 = Scholarships for dependents of deceased veterans/service members

9 = Tuition waiver

10 = Other

Q31 Which communication methods are most effective in reaching you regarding existing programs and services designed specifically for students like yourself? Select all that apply.

- 1 = College catalog
- 2 = On-campus advisors
- 3 = Targeted print advertisements
- 4 = Targeted web-based advertising
- 5 = Targeted postal mailing
- 6 = Targeted email
- 7 = Dedicated website
- 8 = Blogs or social media
- 9 = Other

Q32 What admissions recruiting activities did your institution employ that appealed to you? Select all that apply.

- 1 = Held on-base recruitment of veteran students and dependents
- 2 = Dedicated admission staff for military related applicants
- 3 = Special admissions events for military related applicants
- 4 = Targeted print advertisements
- 5 = Targeted web-based advertising
- 6 = Targeted postal mailing
- 7 = Targeted email
- 8 = Dedicated website
- 9 = Blogs or social media
- 10 = Other

Q33 To your knowledge, what are the most pressing issues affecting you in your educational progress? Select the top three.

- 1 = Financial issues related to tuition and educational expenses
- 2 = Financial issues related to housing and living allowances
- 3 = Appropriate housing availability
- 4 = Clear understanding of VA educational benefits
- 5 = Inclusive and accepting campus climate
- 6 = Academic-related stress
- 7 = Job placement after graduation
- 8 = Child care or other family issues
- 9 = Other

Q34 What would you want your institution to improve to better serve veteran students and/or their dependents?

- 1 = Open Response

## Appendix C: Codebook – VETS Administrators Survey

Q1 Describe the status of your campus as a VETS campus in Tennessee

- 1 = Currently approved
- 2 = Approved, but working toward VETS approval
- 3 = Not approved and not working toward VETS approval
- 4 = Current status unknown

Q2 Does your institution utilize a formal system to record if students have an affiliation with the armed services as either a veteran student or veteran dependent?

- 1 = Yes
- 2 = No

Q3 Select which populations your office formally serves. Select all that apply.

- 1 = Veteran students
- 2 = Veteran dependents

Q4 Please estimate your campus enrollment of veteran military students.

- 1 = Open response

Q5 Please estimate your campus enrollment of veteran dependent students on your campus.

- 1 = Open response

Q6 How frequently does your office work with the Veterans Administration?

- 1 = Daily
- 2 = Weekly
- 3 = Monthly
- 4 = Annually
- 5 = Never

Q7 How frequently does your office work with the Tennessee Department of Veterans Services?

- 1 = Daily
- 2 = Weekly
- 3 = Monthly
- 4 = Annually
- 5 = Never

Q8 Does your campus have a dedicated department or division to deliver services to veteran students and/or their dependents?

- 1 = Yes
- 2 = No

Q9 Are programs for veteran students part of your institutions long-term strategic plan?



- 1 = Yes
- 2 = No
- 3 = Currently in development

Q10 Which division is the primary point of contact for enrolled students to obtain information about institutional service and programs designed for current or former members of the armed services and/or their dependents?

- 1 = Academic Affairs
- 2 = Admissions
- 3 = Counseling
- 4 = Registrar's Office
- 5 = Student Services

Q10-1 Which division is the primary?

Q11 Which campus division administers veterans education benefits counseling? Select all that apply

- 1 = Admissions
- 2 = Bursar
- 3 = Business Office
- 4 = Financial Aid
- 5 = Registrar
- 6 = Student Affairs

Q12 Which of the following initiatives has your institution undertaken to serve veteran students and their families?

- 1 = Sought private funding for campus programs
- 2 = Sought federal funding for campus programs
- 3 = Trained counseling staff to assist students with PTSD, TBI, or other health issues
- 4 = Increased budget for services and programs
- 5 = Increased number of services and programs
- 6 = Increased staff dedicated to target population
- 7 = Established program
- 8 = Established center
- 9 = Increased professional development for faculty
- 10 = Other Please list

Q12\_1 Successful

Q12\_2 Not Successful

Q12\_3 In Development

Q13 Rate the priority of the following initiatives to your campus planning during the next five years

- 1 = Sought private funding for campus programs
- 2 = Sought federal funding for campus programs
- 3 = Trained counseling staff to assist students with PTSD, TBI, or other health issues

- 4 = Increased budget for services and programs
- 5 = Increased number of services and programs
- 6 = Increased staff dedicated to target population
- 7 = Established program
- 8 = Established center
- 9 = Increased professional development for faculty
- 10 = Other Please list
  - Q13\_1 High Priority
  - Q13\_2 Moderate Priority
  - Q13\_3 Low Priority
  - Q13\_4 Not a Priority

Q14 Does your admissions staff have a designated individual who works with veteran students and/or their dependents?

- 1 = Yes
- 2 = Not presently, but in development
- 3 = No

Q15 Does your admissions staff currently have programs and services specifically designed for veteran students and/or their dependents?

- 1 = Yes
- 2 = Not presently, but in development
- 3 = No

Q16 Does your institution engage in admissions or recruitment efforts specifically designed to attract veteran students and/or their dependents?

- 1 = Yes
- 2 = No

Q17 What admissions recruiting methods does your institution employ for veteran students and/or their dependents? Select all that apply

- 1 = On-base recruitment
- 2 = Targeted print advertisements
- 3 = Targeted web-based advertising
- 4 = Targeted postal mailing
- 5 = Targeted email
- 6 = Dedicated website
- 7 = Blogs or social media
- 8 = Other: Please list

Q18 What types of prior learning is accepted for awarding college credit at your institution? Select all that apply.

- 1 = College coursework at another institution
- 2 = Evaluated credit from military training
- 3 = Awards for military occupational training

- 4 = National testing certification programs
- 5 = Evaluated credit for corporate training programs
- 6 = Portfolio review or assessment
- 7 = Examinations or test-out procedures
- 8 = Other: Please list

Q19 Does your institution offer any alternative curriculum delivery formats? Please select all that apply and indicate their frequency of use by veteran students and/or their dependents on your campus.

- 1= Online education
- 2 = Hybrid courses
- 3 = Evening/Night courses
- 4 = Weekend courses
- 5 = Accelerated courses
- 6 = Micro-courses
- 7 = Other: Please list

- Q19\_1 Total
- Q19\_2 Often
- Q19\_3 Rarely
- Q19\_4 Never

Q20 Does your institution have any of the following designated to serve veteran students and/or their dependents? Select all that apply

- 1 = Staff specifically trained to assist with veteran students
- 2 = A licensed counselor or psychologist trained to work with these student's needs
- 3 = Support groups
- 4 = Mentoring opportunities
- 5 = Support groups for these students with disabilities
- 6 = Support groups for the families of these students
- 7 = Support groups for dependents of deceased veterans
- 8 = Counselor or specialist with training for traumatic brain injuries
- 9 = Student-led organizations
- 10 = ROTC
- 11 = Veterans Upward Bound
- 12 = Support groups for women veterans
- 13 = Civilian life skills management training
- 14 = Specific orientation programs
- 15 = Other: Please list

Q21 Does your campus provide counseling to assist students who are veteran students and/or their dependents with the following issues:

- 1 = Yes
- 2 = No

- Q21\_1 Depression

- Q21\_2 PTSD
- Q21\_3 Traumatic Brain Injuries
- Q21\_4 Social Adjustment
- Q21\_5 Stress and Anxiety Management
- Q21\_6 Sexual Trauma

Q22 Which services does your counseling center offer to veteran students and/or their dependents? Select all that apply

- 1 = Access to psychiatrist
- 2 = Coordination and referral to off-campus support services
- 3 = Coordination and referral to support services provided by the US Department of Veterans Affairs
- 4 = Site visits by or co-location of US Department of Veteran Affairs personnel on campus
- 5 = Other: Please list

Q23 Does your institution have an established policy regarding tuition refunds for change of duty station such as military activation, rotation or deployment?

- 1 = Yes
- 2 = No

Q24 Which of the following sources of financial assistance does your institution offer with veteran students and/or their dependents? Select all that apply

- 1 = Discounted tuition for veteran students
- 2 = Discounted tuition for active military students
- 3 = Discounted tuition for dependents/spouses
- 4 = Eligibility for in-state tuition
- 5 = Scholarships for veteran students
- 6 = Scholarships for active military students
- 7 = Scholarships for dependents
- 8 = Scholarships for dependents of deceased veterans/service members
- 9 = Tuition waiver
- 10 = Other: Please list

Q25 What re-enrollment process must military students complete to enroll in classes following deployment?

- 1 = Re-application
- 2 = Re-admittance
- 3 = Complete standard re-enrollment process
- 4 = Complete an expedited re-enrollment process
- 5 = Other: Please list

Q26 What communication methods does your institution employ to inform currently enrolled veteran students and/or their dependents about existing programs and services designed specifically for them? Select all that apply

- 1 = College catalog

- 2 = On-campus advisers
- 3 = Targeted print advertisements
- 4 = Targeted web-based advertising
- 5 = Targeted postal mailing
- 6 = Targeted email
- 7 = Dedicated website
- 8 = Blogs or social media
- 9 = Other: Please list

Q27 Indicate the frequency that veteran students and/or their dependents use the programs and services your institutions provide.

- Q27\_1 Often
- Q27\_2 Sometimes
- Q27\_3 Rarely
- Q27\_4 Never
- Q27\_5 N/A

- 1 = Academic Advising
- 2 = Academic support and tutoring
- 3 = Campus social and cultural events
- 4 = Career planning and services
- 5 = Employment assistance
- 6 = Financial aid/tuition assistance counseling
- 7 = Transition assistance
- 8 = VA educational benefits counseling
- 9 = Veteran student lounge or designated gathering space

Q28 Regarding your veteran students and/or their dependents, what challenges, if any, are you or your office experiencing?

- 1 = Space availability
- 2 = Institutional funding
- 3 = Non-institutional funding
- 4 = State funding
- 5 = Identification and tracking of these students
- 6 = Other: Please list

Q29 To your knowledge what are the most pressing issues affecting veteran students and/or their dependent's educational progress at your institution? Drag answers into the order that best represents the issues you are facing.

- 1 = Financial issues related to tuition and educational expenses
- 2 = Financial issues related to housing and living allowances
- 3 = Appropriate housing availability
- 4 = Clear understanding of VA educational benefits
- 5 = Health issues related to military service or disability
- 6 = Timely issuance of VA education benefits

7 = Inclusive and accepting campus climate  
8 = Academic-related stress  
9 = Job placement after graduation  
10 = Child care or other family issues  
11 = Other: Please list

Notes:

1. All questions were drawn from the American Council on Education (2018) Toolkit for veteran friendly institutions, ACE II survey, except the following created by the authors: Q1-Q14, Q19.4, Q19.7-Q19.10, Q22.6, Q24.2, Q24.7, Q27.3-Q27.4, Q32, Q34.

## Appendix D: Veteran Student Survey Frequently Asked Questions



### ***Improving Tennessee Higher Education for Those Who Have Served*** **Veteran Student Survey**

#### **Why is this important?**

The state of Tennessee wants to recognize your sacrifices through a high-quality education experience. About 47% of veteran students who start undergraduate programs don't complete, even with generous state and GI Bill funding. That's approximately 4600 service members who aren't achieving their goals every year. The State of Tennessee wants to do better for its Tennessean veteran students. We know that funding is only one hurdle in achieving these dreams. This survey may reveal how Tennessee college campuses can better support its veterans.

#### **Why me?**

We need your stories of successes and struggles to improve the transition from service to student. Your campus is one of ten Tennessee undergraduate campuses selected to participate in this study. We encourage all active duty, reserve, retired, and separated service members currently enrolled on your campus to participate.

#### **Who benefits?**

Your responses may help other veterans who follow in your footsteps. We hope this research will improve the educational experience and ultimately financial security and well-being of veteran students across all Tennessee campuses. We will pass the analysis and conclusions to the Tennessee Higher Education commission who work with campus veteran's programs to improve their service to you.

#### **How long will it take?**

This survey takes about 10 minutes to complete. You will only need to complete the survey once.

#### **Is it confidential and anonymous?**

Your responses are voluntary and will be confidential. No response will be individually identified. We will compile all responses together and analyze them as a group. You will receive an email from your veteran's campus office with a link to the survey on Qualtrics. Using this link, you will be able to access the survey anonymously. This is completely voluntary and you may stop at any time. If you have any contacts, please use the email listed below or in the survey.

#### **When will the survey be available?**

The survey will be open for about 30 days during the Fall 2018. You will receive email reminders before it ends.

#### **How can I get a link if I did not receive a survey email?**

If you or other veteran students you know didn't receive a survey email, please contact your veteran campus office. They will be able to send a survey link.

**Thank you for your service and your contributions.**

For more information, contact [corey.s.gheesling@vanderbilt.edu](mailto:corey.s.gheesling@vanderbilt.edu)

## Appendix E: Qualitative Protocol for Identified Campus Stakeholders at Five TN Institutions

Icebreaker

What brought you to (institution)?

How did you begin working with veteran students?

1. Enrollment
  1. How do you think student veterans select your institution?
  2. What other institutions do they typically consider?
  3. Why do you think they selected your institution over the others?
  4. When they enroll, how does your institution capture their veteran status?
    1. What information systems do you use?
  5. Is there a process to link the veteran to the existing veteran community?
  6. How many veterans are full-time students?
  7. How many veteran students inquire about online/hybrid options?
2. Academics
  1. Describe the registration process the veterans go through?
    1. Do they have any trouble creating their schedule?
    2. Do most students know what they want to study before beginning at your institution?
  2. When classes begin, what are the typical challenges they experience?
  3. What critiques do they offer of their courses?
  4. Is there academic support for them? Do they use it?
  5. When selecting a major, why do they select it? How much guidance do they receive in major selection?
    1. Are they satisfied with their majors?
  6. Do veteran students have difficulties finding a job after completing their academic programs?
3. Data
  1. How do you define veteran students?
  2. What information system does your institution use to track veteran students over their enrollment?
  3. What data are stored there?
  4. Who has access to the data?
  5. Who handles advising, faculty or professional advisors?
  6. Are these data used during advising meetings?
    1. If not, why not?
    2. Could it be? What is stopping it?
  7. What do you wish could be done with data to support vets?
4. Community
  1. What outreach exists between the institution and non-profits in the area serving vets?
  2. Does your institution receive any information from the DOD or VA regarding veteran students?
  3. How do veteran students use their non-class time on campus?
  4. Are there any programs explicitly for them?
  5. Do they often form social ties to non-veteran students?



1. Why or why not?
6. Does the institution track campus involvement?
7. Does your campus have any programming in development for veteran students?
8. What do you wish could be different on your campus for veteran students that may help them complete their studies?

## **Appendix F: Digital Presence Protocol**

1. Institution Name:
2. Date(s):
3. Describe the institution's philosophy regarding support for the student veteran.
  - a. Is it one umbrella center or organization under which all services are provided, or are the services provided by separate centers?
  - b. Are those centers unique to student veterans or available to the general population?
4. Describe the types of services available to the student veterans
  - a. Admissions
  - b. Financial
  - c. Social
  - d. Academic
  - e. Mentoring
5. Describe support and access to federal organizations
6. Describe support and access to state organizations
7. Describe support and access to outside non-profit organizations
8. Describe support and access to campus organizations
9. Do the sites provide the point of contact, name, email, phone number, location on campus?
10. Comment on the degree of difficulty in navigating the website. Do the links connect, is the information current, is it easy to read and understand, etc.

## Appendix G: TN-PEARL Observational Protocol

Institution Name:

Date(s):

- Self:
  - What connections with other veterans are evident?
  - What connections between veterans and the non-veteran campus community are evident?
- Situation:
  - What evidence expressing a value for veteran students is present?
  - Describe any interactions between veterans and the campus.
- Support:
  - What evidence communicating available programs is present? Consider symbols, announcements, binders, etc.
  - Comment specifically on the following
    - Financial literacy support
    - Academic support
    - Career support
- Strategies
  - Where is the VETS center located on campus?
  - What is the noise level in the center?
  - Describe the VETS center access in terms of time, security, signage.
  - Describe the physical relationship between the VETS center and commonly accessed administrative offices such as the registrar, bursar, academic advising.
  - How is the VETS center physically oriented?
  - How welcoming was the VETS center?



